

THE J. F. C.
HARRISON
COLLECTION OF
NINETEENTH CENTURY
BRITISH SOCIAL HISTORY

Harrison

HD

8039

.M62

G724

1924

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



3 1197 21900 0426

LIBRARY
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

J. F. Harrison.

THOMAS BURT, M.P., D.C.L.
PITMAN AND PRIVY COUNCILLOR

RECOLLECTIONS OF A LABOUR PIONEER

By FRANCIS WILLIAM SOUTTER.

With an Introduction by T. P. O'CONNOR, M.P.

Illustrated. *Second Edition* Demy 8vo, cloth.
10s. 6d. net.

SOME PRESS OPINIONS

"The whole volume offers a remarkable illustration of the work for public good which may be done by one man."—*Daily Chronicle*.

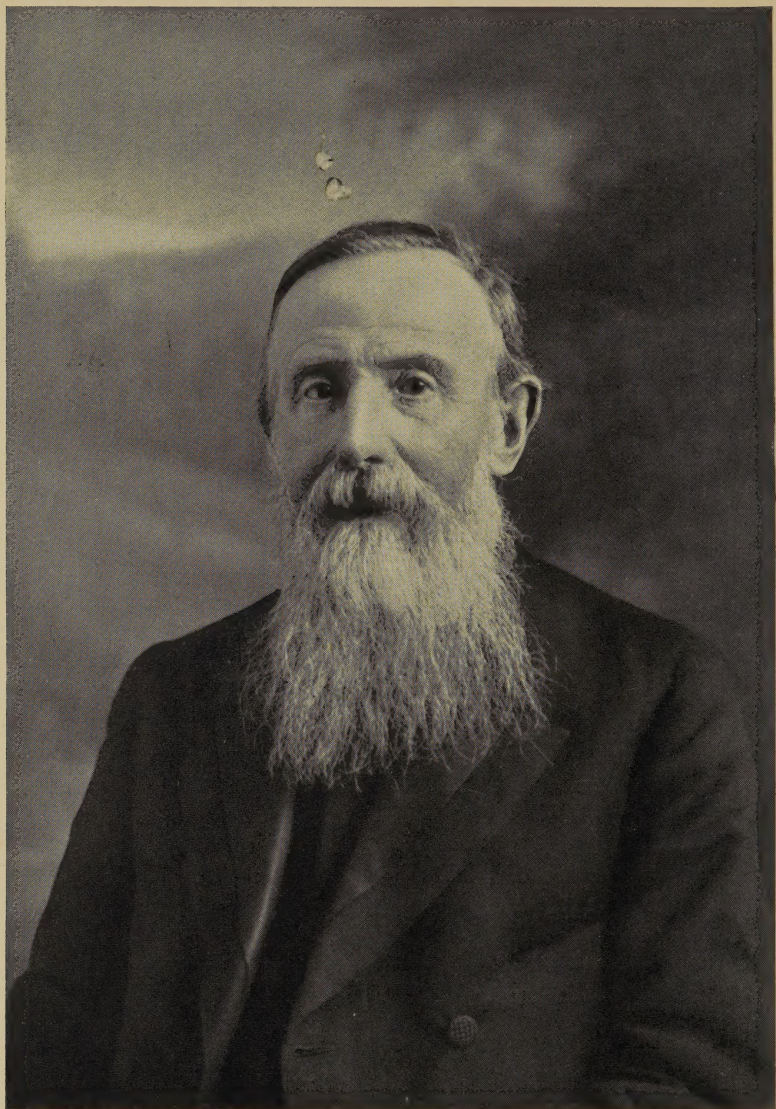
"A charming book of reminiscences."—*Westminster Gazette*.

"The book is a political and human document of the greatest value to all interested in the progress of Labour."—*Sunday Times*.

"He has lived a brave life and written a fine book."—*The Star*.

T. FISHER UNWIN LTD.

LONDON



Nov 1918. Thomas Burt.

THOMAS BURT

M.P., D.C.L., PITMAN & PRIVY COUNCILLOR

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY · WITH

SUPPLEMENTARY CHAPTERS BY AARON

WATSON, *Author of "A Great Labour Leader," etc.*

AND A FOREWORD BY WILFRID BURT

T. FISHER UNWIN LTD

LONDON: ADELPHI TERRACE

First published in 1924

(All rights reserved)

UPB

FOREWORD

“IT IS NOT POSSIBLE,” said Lord Ashley, more famous in his later life as the Earl of Shaftesbury, when presenting the Report of the Royal Commission on Mines to the House of Commons in 1842—“it is not possible for any man, if he have but a heart in his bosom, to read the details of this awful document without a combined feeling of shame, terror, and indignation.”

My father was five years old when these words were said, and five years later, under conditions not very greatly improved, he went down to work in a coal mine, in the circumstances described in the ensuing pages.

Lord Ashley's Bill of 1842, proposing, among other things, to restrict the hours of boy labour in mines, was energetically opposed in both Houses of Parliament, and was considerably modified before it reached the third reading. The Act as it was placed on the Statute Book provided that, after March 1, 1843, “no women and girls were to be employed underground, nor boys under the age of ten years, except those who were already in the pits at the time; that no boy was to be apprenticed under the age of ten years, nor for a period exceeding eight years; that the wages were not to be paid at or near a public-house; and that the Secretary of State should be empowered to appoint proper persons to visit and inspect the mines and collieries. Its clauses were enforced by a liability to fines, none of which must exceed £10. It was an Act that dealt only with the most glaring abuses, and that imposed wholly insignificant penalties in connection with those.

Nevertheless, with the exception of the time he worked

THOMAS BURT

at Sherburn House pit as a boy of about twelve, doing work which was considered heavy for lads three or four years his senior, my father always regarded his pit days as among the happiest in his life. But then, as Viscount Grey many years afterwards remarked, "he was a most persistent optimist."

One sees from his story how, early in life, he strove to acquire knowledge and self-discipline. He owed much, no doubt, to the example and precept of his father, his uncles, and other relatives, and to the earnest, simple, and sincere local and travelling preachers who were frequent guests at his father's house. These were men of sterling qualities, and their influence was all for good. Some of them were disappointed that father did not become a preacher; but those who survived to see him reach mature years would, I think, be satisfied that his was to be a life of great usefulness, and would find a deep satisfaction in the thought that they had helped to encourage and inspire him, as he himself has been a source of inspiration to more than one youth who grew up to be a great preacher of the Gospel.

As he developed towards manhood, undoubtedly the chief influence for good in his life was that of my mother. Without her he would never have been quite the man he was, and there is little doubt that, if her influence and help had not been at hand, the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association would have met with disaster in its early days. The vital aid given by my mother to the Miners' Union in its infancy is, I think, generally recognized by the few survivors of the early years of the Association.

Self-discipline was, I think, the keystone of his career. Thomas Burt was of a highly nervous temperament. His was a fiery spirit, and he was a born fighter. Yet, beyond a slight trembling, I never saw him show any

FOREWORD

sign of excitement. I never saw him angry ; and my mother, who knew him all her life, and lived with him, as playmate, sweetheart and wife, for seventy-three years, can say the same. I never heard him say a hard word against anyone, nor did I ever know him to hesitate to rebuke any action which he considered deserving of censure. No matter what might be a man's shortcomings, my father could always recognize some good in him, and would try to help him to develop his best qualities.

Many appear to have regarded him as a timid, milk-and-water politician and trade unionist. They were sorely mistaken. No one who followed his career could doubt his courage. Though he was prominent in the cause of peace, at least one famous soldier recognised his fighting qualities. The late General Sir Henry Havelock-Allan, V.C., on one occasion said to him : " There's nothing I should like better than to lead a regiment of fellows like you into action. Nothing could stop you."

Mention of Sir Henry reminds me of a little incident which occurred when I was a youngster scarcely in my 'teens. Father had me on the Terrace of the House of Commons, when Sir Henry Havelock-Allan and Sir Wilfrid Lawson entered into conversation with us. Presently Sir Wilfrid said playfully to me that he hoped I should be a better man than my father. Sir Henry placed his hand on my shoulder and said very gravely : " My lad, if you are ever half so good a man as your father you will be much better than one can expect a man to be."

Sir Wilfrid told one or two of those anecdotes which were so characteristic, and presently Sir Henry related how, on a recent visit to Berlin, he had been talking to a German-Jew friend, when Sir Wilfrid joined them for a moment. " After you had left us," said Sir Henry, " I told my friend that you were one of our greatest statesmen." (Sir Wilfrid indicated dissent.) " I asked him what he

THOMAS BURT

thought of you, and he replied : ‘ Vell, he is certainly a vairy nice gentleman, but he does not look well. Don’t you think he has been drinking too much lately ? ’ ” Sir Wilfrid joined heartily in the laughter, and thoroughly enjoyed the story.

Like most good fighters, Thomas Burt never looked for trouble. He never would fight unless for some principle which could not be achieved or maintained pacifically. He often quoted, and always acted up to, the advice of Polonius to Laertes,

Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel ; but, being in,
Bear ’t that the opposed may beware of thee.

He sometimes would tell how Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, said that, when anyone smote him on one cheek he always turned the other ; and, being asked what course he pursued should his opponent smite that also, replied very slowly and solemnly : “ Then I give him Hades ! ”

The trade union leaders of fifty years ago had need to be made of the sternest stuff. Only to resolute, determined, fearless men, who were prepared to sacrifice their own interests and those of their families for the sake of their fellow-men, was any great success possible in this direction. No man who cared much for his personal comfort or welfare was likely to take office in a trade union. Only to those who felt they had a real call or mission to help their fellows, at no matter what cost to themselves, did such office appeal. The pioneer usually does have a hard time, and it is not easy for those who follow to realize how severe the struggle has been and what difficulties have had to be overcome. In nothing is this more true than in the Labour movement.

One thing of which my father always spoke with pride was the loyal way in which the Northumberland miners

FOREWORD

honoured the contracts entered into on their behalf by their duly accredited representatives, no matter how disappointing the terms might be. The machinery set up in the Northumberland coal trade for the settlement of wages questions during the latter half of last century (the Joint Committee, established in 1872, and the Conciliation Board, first established in 1894), probably compare favourably with any machinery yet devised for the settlement of such differences.

Another point deserves mention : Thomas Burt clearly foresaw, and gave warning long before any such movement was attempted, that a national strike was foredoomed to failure. I think most trade unionists admit this now, though some still seem to think that, if only it can be made sufficiently general, such a strike will succeed.

One of the old-fashioned virtues possessed in a marked degree both by my father and my mother was thrift. As a young pitman, my father contributed to a building society, and these contributions he maintained throughout his life, even when his means were most straitened. The credit for this, of course, is due to my mother as much as to my father. Both felt strongly that, without saving, one could not be independent, and neither could brook the idea of dependence upon others. With all their thrift, my parents were always generous to the unfortunate, and both had a horror of Mammon-worship.

“The Socialistic Labour Party, in its costly and perverse interference with trades unions, made undeserved attacks upon and unnecessary difficulties for the older leaders ; but from the time father left the pits,” writes my brother, Mr. Peter Burt, “he, like his old colleagues, would not have felt humiliated in going back to work in them, if need be. It is useful and honourable work, and of great importance to the nation. Undoubtedly this humble spirit fortified his courage in adhering to

THOMAS BURT

his convictions from the outset to the end of his career.

“The course set for the Labour movement often gave him much misgiving in his later years, but he had unshakable faith that ultimately the old, sane, practical direction will be resumed, which, in conjunction with other good movements, will gradually bring about a more Christian industrial system and an improved people.

“As he wrote (in *Brooke Foss Westcott, Bishop of Durham: An Appreciation*): ‘Wisdom, justice, gentleness—in a word, Love—these are to be the all-conquering weapons of the reformer. They alone will bring ultimate and permanent victory.’”

Among the many beautiful and noble things said about my father, during his life and after his death, I like to call to mind the words of Lord Channing of Wellingborough, who described him as “the purest and noblest man I have ever been privileged to know. He was the only Member of Parliament whom nobody dared to criticize—simple and true in every thought and word of life.”

The autobiography which follows has been carefully supervised by my father’s old friend, Aaron Watson. In all essentials it remains just as it was written. Nothing has been added, with the exception of the chapter-headings, and nothing has been taken away. The slight corrections that were necessary were such as my father must himself have made had the printed matter passed through his own hands.

The object of the Supplementary Chapters has been to continue the autobiographic interest as far as possible in my father’s own words. “A discursive method, for which I shall probably be reproached,” says Mr. Watson, “seemed to be the best means of compressing the narrative within the assigned limits of space.”

WILFRID BURT.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
FOREWORD	5

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER I

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD	19
---------------------------------	----

On Autobiographical Writing—The Author's Birthplace—His Parents—The Burt Family—The Weatherburns—Early Migrations—The Chartist Movement—A Contented Childhood—Country Rambles—Watching the Wheels go Round—A kindly Grandfather—The Avenue Head Farm—A Strike and an Eviction—Life in Colliery Houses—A Dame School and a Quaint Mode of Punishment.

CHAPTER II

LIFE IN THE COLLIERY VILLAGES	33
---	----

The Great Strike of 1844—Blacklegs and Candy-men—Eviction Incidents—An Aged Amazon—"Jake" Mills and His Keg of Powder—Mrs. Burt's Childhood—A Fight between Strikers and Blacklegs—Strike Privations—A Friend in Need—The Losses of the Strike—Mr. Burt's Father a "Marked Man."

CHAPTER III

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS	43
-------------------------------------	----

Removal to Durham—The First and Only Recitation—A Great Snow—Struggle with a Snowdrift—An Unreasonable Schoolmaster—A Tragi-Comedy on Ice—Abrupt Close of Schooldays—The Key of Knowledge attained—Starting Life in the Coal-pit—Children's Long Days in the Mines.

THOMAS BURT

CHAPTER IV

PAGE

BOYS' WORK IN THE COAL-PIT	52
--------------------------------------	----

Changes for the Better in Coal-Working—A Dangerous Pit—The Perils of Coal-dust—First Feelings Underground—A Trapper-boy's Work—The Consequence of Sleeping on Duty—A Pleasing Promotion—"Spanker": A Character Sketch—"Lady," a Pit Pony—A Famous Methodist Preacher—The Two Peters—Preacher and M.P.—A Narrow Escape from a Terrible Death.

CHAPTER V

FIGHTING FOR PEACE	63
------------------------------	----

Another Removal—Running Waters—A Coveted Position—Pit-boy Bullies—The Battle that never came Off—On the War-path—Quarrelsome Pit-Boys—An Adventure with Oxen—A Lesson in Civility—Early Scars—A Strike for Honest Measurement of Coals—Agitation in the Coalfield.

CHAPTER VI

EARLY INFLUENCES	76
----------------------------	----

A Time of Misery—The Trials of "Pony-Putting"—Objur-gatory Language—A Father's Sad Reproof—A Life of Sleeping and Working—Wagon-way Experiences—Pay Saturdays and Seaside Strolls—Itinerant Preachers—A Humorist against His Will—Two Sunday-School Superintendents—A Chapel Incident.

CHAPTER VII

THE EXPERIENCES OF A PUTTER-BOY	89
---	----

Back to Northumberland—"Home"—Seven in One Room—At Cramlington Colliery—Working Hours in Northumberland—"Water-Leading"—"Dicky" Fynes—Blind Ponies and a One-Eyed Man—Dangers of the Mine—A Thrilling Escape—A Wise and Sturdy Pit Pony.

CHAPTER VIII

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE	98
------------------------------------	----

Still "Flitting"—Seaton Delaval—Archibald Forbes on Pit-men's Wives—The Author becomes a Coal-Hewer—"Alone, withouten any Company"—Two Miles Underground in the Dark—A Better Moral Atmosphere—The "Deputy"—Tom Mudd—Joe Young—A Dangerous Job in a Risky Place—Eager to Hew—Ten Happy Years—Thomas Weatherburn—The Coal-Hewer's Earnings.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER IX

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS	113

Awakening of the Desire for Knowledge—Peter Burt's Library—The Author's Early Reading—Introduction to Great Literature—A Difficulty about Gibbon—The Poets—Wordsworth—Vigorous Self-Culture—Acquisition of Shorthand—The Love of Knowledge for its Own Sake—Companions of Early Manhood—The Author's Father.

CHAPTER X

HARDSHIPS AND CRUELITIES OF MINING LIFE	128
---	-----

A Strike at Seaton Delaval—Fines and Forfeitures—A Mine-Manager's Foolishness—"Jimmy the Doctor"—Arrests and Imprisonment—The Punishment of the Best Men, and the Reason—A Remarkable Prison Episode—The Cruelties of Prison Life—Changed Conditions—Dismissal—Seeking Leave to Toil.

CHAPTER XI

MARRIED LIFE, SECRETARIAL WORK, AND EXTENDED READING	137
--	-----

Removal to Choppington—First Experiences of Secretarial Work and of Public Speaking—Conjugating the Verb *Amo*—Married to Mary Weatherburn—"The Angel in the House"—"Cavilling" for Places in the Mine—A Comfortable Colliery—The First Miners' Hall—Two Good Managers—Reading Shakespeare and Ruskin—The First Number of the *Cornhill*—*Unto This Last*—Joseph Fairbairn—A Rhyming Rivalry.

CHAPTER XII

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION	152
--------------------------------------	-----

The Hartley Colliery Accident—Lax Management at Burradon, and the Consequence—The Author's First Letter to the Press—A Bolt from the Blue—"The Yearly Bond"—Forming a Trade Union—A Bad Place in the Workings—First Election as Delegate—Earliest Public Speech—Methods of Preparation—A Trade Union Revival—Before a Parliamentary Select Committee—First Sight of London—Alexander Macdonald—Immense Progress in Conditions of Pit-Life—Elected Secretary and Agent of the Union.

THOMAS BURT

CHAPTER XIII

PAGE

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN	169
--	-----

Farewell to Pit-Work—The Northumberland Miners' Union and its Work—A Self-Imposed Vow—Attitude of the Coalowners—An Epoch-making Strike—The Miners' Wages—The Candy-men Again—Evictions and Retaliations—Miners sent to Gaol—Stories of Prison Life—Introduction of Blacklegs—A Black Chapter in Mining Annals—Sharp Controversy with a Coalowner—Joseph Cowen—Journalistic Acquaintances.

CHAPTER XIV

THE POLITICAL ECONOMISTS AND LABOUR	188
---	-----

A New Abode and New Friends—A Debating Class—Wider Reading—George Eliot—Adam Smith and J. S. Mill on Trade Unions—Differences with the Economists—The Case of Two Neighbouring Collieries—The Fate of the Wages Fund Theory—What the Political Economists Forgot.

CHAPTER XV

THE HISTORY OF A DECADE	196
-----------------------------------	-----

Ten Years of Stress and Struggle—Employers' Bitter Hostility to Trade Unions—Petty Tyrannies and Discontent—The Growth of the Union—Momentous Change in the Attitude of the Coalowners—Removal to Newcastle—The New Offices—John Nixon—Important Contribution to the *Shipping World*.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION	207
---------------------------------------	-----

Entrance on Political Life—How the Miners Won the Franchise—In the Field as a Candidate—Energetic Helpers—The Two Trotters—Thomas Glassey—Robert Elliott—Andrew Fairbairn—Whigs and Radicals—First Address as Candidate—An Admirable Political Opponent—Opposing Candidates at the Same Meetings—Major Duncan and the Miners—Polling-Day Scenes.

CHAPTER XVII

RETURNED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS	220
--	-----

Major Duncan in a Coal-Mine—The Major in a Miner's Cottage—Conservative Approval of the New Radical Member—Rival Banquets—A Defeated Conservative among Victorious Radicals—Graceful Election Souvenir.

CONTENTS

SUPPLEMENTARY CHAPTERS

I

PAGE

FINANCIAL POSITION, AND A MAIDEN SPEECH	231
---	-----

Why the Autobiography was Not Completed—The Finances of a Miners' Leader—Thrifty Living—The Relations of Members and Constituents—Declines Government Appointment—Reduces His Own Salary—Lord Granville and Mr. Burt—A Maiden Speech.

II

THE OUTLOOK OF A MINERS' LEADER	243
---	-----

His Views at the Outset of His Trade Union Career—Boys in Coal-pits—The Miners' Grievances—Hunted for by the Police—Early Difficulties as Secretary—Efforts to Establish Amicable Relations between Employers and Employed—A Remarkable Coalowner—The Birth of the Joint Committee.

III

LABOUR AND PARLIAMENT	254
---------------------------------	-----

Labour Questions in the Early 'Seventies—The Trade Unionists and a Royal Commission—Mr. Burt and the House of Commons—Early Parliamentary Friendships—"The Dogs should not Suffer"—"Not an Orator; not even a Talker"—The Demand for Speeches.

IV

SUNSHINE AND STORM	264
------------------------------	-----

Sponsor for Joseph Chamberlain—Labour Members and Labour Legislation—Mr. Chamberlain's Charges—Taking the Unpopular Side—The Afghan War—Great Parliamentary Figures—A Time of Distress and Trouble—The Mischief-Makers—Stoning the Prophets—A Protest.

V

ENTERS MR. GLADSTONE'S GOVERNMENT	273
---	-----

Progress in "The House"—Style—Love of the Poets—Seconding the Motion of "No Confidence"—The General Election of 1892—Correspondence with Mr. Gladstone—Mr. Burt a Member of the Government—The Death of Alexander Macdonald—Labour Questions in Parliament—The Miners' Federation.

THOMAS BURT

VI

	PAGE
SOCIALISM AND LABOUR	284

"Men on the Make"—Socialistic Agitation—Fomenting Strikes—The New Unionism—Mr. Burt as President of the Trade Union Congress—George Jacob Holyoake on Mr. Burt—A Piece of Advice to Socialists—The Labour Party Constitution—A Notable Recognition by the Labour Parties.

VII

CONVERSATIONS WITH MR GLADSTONE AND OTHERS	292
--	-----

Autobiographical Sketches—Mr. Gladstone—A Sick-bed Interview—A Conversation with the "G.O.M."—The Manners of Parliament—Chamberlain's Cleverness—Lord Rosebery and the Labour Leaders—The Late Lord Chaplin and Mr. Gladstone—A Gladstone Anecdote—John Morley on Pensions—A Garden-Party at Downing Street.

VIII

PRIVY COUNCILLOR AND "FATHER OF THE HOUSE"	302
--	-----

Promotion to the Privy Council—The Berlin Labour Conference—Holiday Excursions—Becomes "Father of the House"—Condolences to Queen Alexandra—"Dr. Burt"—The Freedom of Newcastle—The International Arbitration League.

IX

LAST YEARS	313
----------------------	-----

The Miners' Annual Picnic—An Incapacitating Illness—"The Best Things We Have Done"—The Last Monthly Circular—Retirement from Parliament—The Closing Days.

INDEX	317
-----------------	-----

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Autobiography of Thomas Burt

CHAPTER I

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD

On Autobiographical Writing—The Author's Birthplace—His Parents—The Burt Family—The Weatherburns—Early Migrations—The Chartist Movement—A Contented Childhood—Country Rambles—Watching the Wheels go Round—A kindly Grandfather—The Avenue Head Farm—A Strike and an Eviction—Life in Colliery Houses—A Dame School and a Quaint Mode of Punishment.

IT HAS ALWAYS seemed to me that no kind of literature is more interesting and inspiring than biography and autobiography. Two little books that I read in my boyhood impressed and stimulated me greatly. They helped me in my efforts to live bravely, and to use my life for noble ends. These were the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and of Frederick Douglass.

More than once it has been suggested to me that the history of my own life might be useful, and not without interest to others. Especially has it occurred to me that boy pit-life in the first half of the nineteenth century, depicted from within, may interest the miners of to-day; that my long and close connection with the trade union movement may enable me to say something helpful to those who are grappling with present-day labour problems; and that my striving to acquire knowledge and self-discipline under extreme difficulties may

THOMAS BURT

encourage youths of the working class, with better opportunities than mine, to put forth their utmost efforts in the same direction. These considerations, rather than anything of a more strictly personal nature, have determined me, not without hesitation, to write the following pages.

The autobiographer is almost perforce an egotist. To deliberately sit down and write of one's self and one's own experiences implies a somewhat exalted notion of one's own importance.

Mark Twain, himself an autobiographer, has said: "An autobiography is the one work in which a man, against his own will, and in spite of his utmost striving to the contrary, reveals himself in his true light to the world." Mark Twain was not less a philosopher than a humourist, and his remark is perfectly true. I must take the risk of this self-revelation, and, while not pretending to be exempt from the ordinary vanities and frailties of my kind, I shall yet strive to keep the merely personal element within moderate bounds.

I was born at Murton Row, in the county of Northumberland, on November 12, 1837. Murton Row is a hamlet consisting of some sixteen single-story one-room cottages situate midway between Backworth and Percy Main. It is on the south-eastern edge of the well-known Northumberland steam-coal field. Like the greater part of the steam-coal district of Northumberland, the surrounding country is flat, bare, and characterless. Except the hawthorn hedges, which separate the fields, hardly a shrub or a tree is visible for miles around. Yet Nature has not been altogether unbountiful in that region. Southwards, within two or three miles, is the River Tyne; and three miles to the east is the ever-fresh and breezy North Sea. Killingworth Colliery, where, in the early years of the nineteenth century, George Stephenson

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD

lived and worked, where he first showed signs of the mechanical genius which has done so much to facilitate travel and to promote our present-day civilization, is about three miles to the west. Four or five miles beyond Killingworth is Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Within a dozen yards of the house in which I was born is the Blyth and Tyne wagon-way, the great highway along which the coal is carried from the pits to the Tyne. The most conspicuous object in the neighbourhood was the old engine-house, from which were hauled the coal-wagons before the days of the locomotive. Arthur Young, who visited Tyneside in the later half of the eighteenth century, speaks, not without wonder and admiration, of the coal-wagon roads as "great works carried over all sorts of inequalities of ground as far as a distance of nine or ten miles. The tracks of the wheels are marked with pieces of timber let into the road for the wheels of the wagons to run on, by which means one horse is enabled to draw—and that with ease—fifty or sixty bushels of coals."

My father, Peter Burt, was, at the time of my birth, working as a coal-hewer at one of the collieries in the neighbourhood of Earsdon. In addition to his hard day's work at the coal-face and his underground travelling, he must have had to walk a distance of three or four miles daily to and from the pit-bank. My mother's maiden name was Weatherburn. She was the daughter of Thomas Weatherburn, engineman, of Cowpen Colliery, near Blyth.

Froude, in his *Life of Carlyle*, tells us that "1837 was the coldest winter remembered in England. It was Murphy's winter, when the Thames was frozen from Oxford to Reading." Yet the new-comer at Murton Row, in the bleak November of that year, was doubtless well cared for and tenderly nursed. No child "born

THOMAS BURT

in the purple" could have had more loving or better parents. Twin sisters so much alike that it was difficult to distinguish them were born before me. Both died in infancy. A brother, four and a half years my junior, called after my father, Peter, was the only other member of the family.

Peter—manly, brave, warm-hearted, truly brotherly—died in the spring of 1874, at the early age of thirty-three. He had long been an invalid, confined to the house. The last time he was out of doors was to drive to Bedlington to record his vote—the only vote he ever gave or was able to give—for me at the General Election of 1874.

Of my ancestry I can say little or nothing. There is a family tradition that the Burts originally came from Scotland. The name is, I believe, more common in North Britain than elsewhere. All that is certainly known is that my father and his brothers were colliers, as their family before them had been, in Northumberland. All their relatives, too, of the Burt name followed the same occupation in Northumberland or Durham. My paternal grandfather, who died before I was born, was in the later years of his life an invalid. He suffered much from asthma—a disease which cut him off in middle life. His early death was not improbably due to the bad underground ventilation of those days.

My father was born at Hebburn Colliery, on the south bank of the Tyne, in the year 1810. He was one of a rather large family, there being in all five brothers and two sisters. The sisters died in middle life. The brothers, except Thomas, who died when he was sixty-two, all lived until they were over three-score and ten. One of them, Andrew, lived to be an octogenarian. Without exception they were honest, industrious, temperate men. They were healthy, vigorous, skilful workers.

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD

My father, who had been severely injured in the back, in the mine, just when he was reaching manhood, was the least physically robust of the brothers.

Andrew, Robert, and Peter had early in life been brought under the influence of Methodism. They joined the Primitive Methodist connection, two of them (my father and my uncle Andrew) becoming local preachers, and my uncle Robert a class-leader, of that body. Andrew continued to preach almost to the end of his long life. During his later years he left the Primitives and joined the Lay Church.

The Weatherburns, there is reason to believe, have lived in the county of Northumberland for many generations. They seem to have been farmers on a small scale—a sort of yeomen or crofters—in times when the land was parcelled out into smaller shares than it is now. My maternal grandfather, Thomas Weatherburn, after whom I was named, was a colliery engineman. At the time of my birth he had retired from active service, owing to advancing years. The Weatherburns, too, were a large family. Three sons and seven daughters of Thomas grew to manhood and womanhood. The sons all became enginemen, though the youngest, Thomas, afterwards went underground as a coal-hewer, mainly because, being a strong, skilful worker, he could earn higher wages in the pit than at the winding-engine. Other members of the Weatherburn family took to engine-tending in one form or another. A brother of my grandfather's was a friend of George Stephenson, and was invited by that distinguished man to the South of England, where he was promoted to some place of trust or foremanship. His descendants are still superintending engines, or are otherwise employed in connection with one or other of the great railway companies of the country. The Weatherburns, like the Burts, were steady, industrious,

THOMAS BURT

truth-loving and truth-speaking folk. They could all read, write, and do the simple rules of arithmetic, accomplishments by no means universal among the pit-villagers in those days. This showed that, in spite of hard times and the strain of bringing up large families, the frugal parents had striven to do their best for the education of their children. They were quiet, peaceful, peace-loving people, though most of them possessed no mean faculty for telling plain, disagreeable truths in case of need.

Memory awoke in me early, though not quite so early as I at one time believed. I once startled my mother by averring, in all seriousness, that I distinctly remembered the day of my birth! When she doubted and demurred, I was ready with circumstantial details which seemed to me conclusive. The incidents adduced were certainly based on fact, but it turned out that the facts related to my brother's birth rather than to my own.

From Murton Row my parents removed to Whitley. After a year or two an explosion occurred in the Whitley pit which compelled them to seek a fresh home at Seghill Colliery, three or four miles northwards. This was the beginning of a wandering, gipsy life which continued until I was fifteen years of age. Within that short period my father worked at some seven or eight collieries in Durham and Northumberland, and I can count no fewer than eighteen houses in which we lived.

My earliest distinct recollections belong to Seghill. I have, indeed, dim, shadowy memories of witnessing a troop of cavalry trot past our doors at Whitley. Such a spectacle, always unusual in the pit districts, would be likely to impress the young imagination. My father, to whom I once mentioned the circumstance, confirmed my childish recollection. Those were days of social convulsion and suffering. The Chartist agitation was in full swing. Many of the young Northumbrian pitmen

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD

were believers in the "physical force" side of the movement. Trade was bad, hours long, wages low: grievances were manifold. Workmen were without votes; they were imperfectly organized, and large numbers of them despaired of redress by other methods than a resort to physical force. Under these circumstances some of my uncles, as I afterwards learned, joined the physical force Chartists, and possessed themselves of pikes, guns, and other deadly implements. Happily their martial ardour did not carry them to the length of open rebellion.

Some four years of my childhood—from about my third to my seventh year—were spent at Seghill. We lived at Blake Town, then called by the less ambitious name of the New Row. Though more than seventy years have passed, my memory of some of the incidents of those days is as clear and vivid as if they had occurred but yesterday. But what is there that is worth the telling? Except that I was singularly fortunate in my parents and kindred, my life was like that of tens of thousands of pit children of that time. As I look back, my childhood seems to have been a very happy one. I was healthy, active, and vigorous. I indulged in marble-playing, kite-flying, and other boyish games. A favourite pastime was to watch the bigger lads bathing in "the burn," a rivulet which ran, or lazily meandered, through the fields a few hundred yards from the bottom of the Row. There were deep pools into which the more daring and skilful of the bathers would dive and swim and disport themselves. When, in later years, I have seen the turbid streamlet, with hardly energy enough to make its way to the sea, I have found it difficult to believe that it was the sparkling burn of my childhood, or that it could have been an attractive bathing place, even for boys.

"The child is father to the man," and even thus early

THOMAS BURT

I was fond of solitary rambles through the fields and country lanes. In the springtime I gathered daisies, cowslips, and primroses, and listened with wonder and rapture to the singing birds. The laws of trespass were not strictly enforced at Seghill in those days, though I had a wholesome fear of the colliery policeman, and sometimes had that dread functionary at my heels.

My father's long hours and hard work left him but little leisure or inclination to take me for country walks. Occasionally, on pay Saturdays or other holidays, he would do so, to my great delight. My grandfather Weatherburn was a great walker, and in his long strolls on business or pleasure I was a frequent companion. Though he was then seventy years of age, or upwards, he was singularly hale, vigorous, and active. I remember him as a man of genial aspect, of unfailing kindness and good-nature, quiet, patient, self-possessed. He had a great liking for children, and was full of little plans and devices to interest and amuse them. As I have said, he took long walks into the country; and, as he always made a point of going by one road and returning by another, I became familiar with the locality for many miles round. Children as a rule are curious and inquisitive, and it seems I was no exception to the rule. Often did I puzzle the old man by the number and abstruseness of my interrogations, and the pertinacity with which I demanded an answer. Returning from one of these early rambles, my grandfather avowed to my mother that I was the "queerest bairn he had ever known. One had need to be well-informed to travel with that child. He is for ever asking questions. He won't be put off with a surface answer, but he wants to know the far end of everything."

If it be true, as Bacon tells us, that "wise questioning is the best half of science," and if my questions had been

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD

as well directed as they were persistent, I should have gathered a vast amount of useful knowledge.

I was allowed great freedom in my wanderings, though there were certain limitations imposed upon me. I was forbidden to go near the pit ; the wagon-way and the engine-house were also prohibited areas. There was one part of this commandment that I found it difficult to keep. The standing engine near the bottom of the Row, which in those pre-locomotive days hauled the coal of the Cramlington Collieries towards the Tyne, had overpowering attraction and fascination for me. Whether it was the Weatherburn engineering blood in my veins that prompted the curiosity, or whether the impulse to disobedience came from a remoter ancestor, I know not, but I certainly not infrequently violated the maternal command. Beside the engine I would stand an hour at a stretch watching the big wheels whirling round, watching the spinning ropes and the passing wagons with ever-increasing wonder and admiration. The place was not free from danger. One or two children had been killed through straying on the wagon-way. The mother's prohibition was therefore not without reason.

I have referred to my grandfather's wonderful vigour and activity, even after he had passed his three-score and ten years. Of this alertness I saw many instances. Not to mention the long walks, extending over many miles and many hours, he would sometimes run races with me for my amusement, and perhaps for his own. On one occasion he surprised me by climbing a high tree to get a young cushat, or wild dove, to show me. After he had brought it down to let me see it, he, with characteristic thoughtfulness—for he was of a most tender, humane disposition—again climbing the tree, replaced it in its nest.

He was an expert swimmer, and he once intimated

THOMAS BURT

his desire to instruct me in that healthy, useful art. Not less eager was I to learn than he was to teach me—indeed, more eager, for when it came to the point, he hesitated, and I had great difficulty in persuading him to let me go into the water. This was in the burn to which I have already referred, though a few miles below Seghill, in Holywell Dene. At last he consented. The experiment did not prove a great success, and it was never repeated—under my grandfather's tuition. It was not until long after my grandfather's death, and not until I had reached early manhood, that, without any assistance from teachers, I learned to swim—or, more strictly, to float. On the back or on the breast I can rest or float for a long time with confidence and without discomfort, but I never became expert in propelling myself through the water. I have sometimes speculated as to what I could or would do in any great emergency, such as being suddenly thrown into deep water. If I had a long distance to swim, my fate would be sealed. On the other hand, I think, unless the conditions were very adverse, I could swim a moderate distance, or keep my head above water until a friendly helper came to my rescue—if he were not too long about it. In the way of helping others I have reflected, not without self-reproach, that I should be of little use.

Among the farmers, gardeners, and small shopkeepers of the neighbourhood my grandfather had many friends, and their houses afforded convenient halting-places in our rambles. Though in every sense temperate, the old gentleman liked a glass of beer, and occasionally, though seldom when I was his companion, he would call at a wayside inn for rest and refreshment. Teetotalism was then almost unknown among the north-country colliers. My father was, indeed, a member of the Rechabite Order—a total abstinence Friendly Society—but his views

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD

and habits were deemed by his neighbours rather new-fangled and extravagant, and none of my Seghill relatives followed my father's abstemious example. My grandfather's houses of call were mostly among the farmers. A favourite halting-place was the Avenue Head Farm, near Seaton Terrace—said avenue leading to Delaval Hall, the ancient seat of the Delavals, now the property of Lord Hastings. This was, *par excellence*, "The Avenue," nobody thereabouts dreaming, as I certainly never dreamed, that there could be any other avenue. The farm at the Avenue Head was then in the occupation of a family named Duxfield—the mother a widow, with two or three stalwart sons and a daughter who worked the farm. To the friendly hospitality of the Duxfields we were indebted for shelter when the strike shortly afterwards occurred, and when we were evicted from our cottage at Seghill. At Duxfield's farm my grandfather and I were always welcome. On these travels I, boy-like, seemed to be always hungry, and the "old wife."¹ as, in spite of repeated remonstrances from my mother, I persisted in calling Mrs. Duxfield, was ever ready to feed me. The fare, though no doubt wholesome and nutritious, must have been very coarse and homely. On one occasion she gave me a large slice of barley bread. Despite my keen appetite, the process of mastication and deglutition appears to have been wellnigh impossible. I startled the old lady, and greatly amused my grandfather, by crying out: "Give me a glass of milk; I'm choking." The milk was soon forthcoming, and ever afterwards the barley bread was either lubricated with butter or washed down with milk.

Near by us at Seghill lived my uncles and aunts, James and Hannah Waddle and Cuthbert and Margaret Todd. Mrs. Waddle and Mrs. Todd were my mother's elder sisters.

¹ In the pit-villages every woman was in those days called a wife.

THOMAS BURT

They were very fond of children, and, having none of their own, they made a great deal of me. My aunts were remarkable, even among the Northumbrian pitmen's^{es} wives, for their excellent housekeeping. The houses consisted of one room, with an unceiled garret. The one room had to do duty as scullery, wash-house, bakery, kitchen, and parlour; yet there was neither dirt nor disorder. My aunts' houses, with their clean-washed red-brick floors, their shining mahogany furniture, polished with beeswax and turpentine and a plentiful application of "elbow-grease," and their well-stocked pantries, carried to my childish fancy every proof of luxury and abundance. My mother was not behindhand as a tidy and thrifty housekeeper, but her means were narrower. Our style of living was plain and homely. In the hardest times I was fortunate enough never to lack bread, but the butter sometimes ran short. Once when I asked for butter, my mother told me that "the butter had all run into the cow's horns." "Then give me some cheese till the butter comes back," was my modest request. Cheese, alas! was not more plentiful than butter. My aunt Waddle's more richly stocked larder was ever attractive to me. She it was who first gave me a taste of a light-boiled egg. It was just a spoonful, indeed, but it remained a memory for many a long day! Then her "yellow coffee" was a mystery to me, and a luxury fit for the gods. "Can't you get some coffee like aunt Hannah's?" I asked my mother one day. "Our's, my dear, is exactly the same," explained my mother. "Our's isn't yellow." Then my mother saw the point. "Aunt Hannah buys cream. We can't afford it, my dear." After all, it was no intolerable hardship for a pitman's child not to be able to feast on cream and eggs, or even to be deprived of cheese and butter in those days. Thousands could not get bread enough to eat.

A PIT-LAD'S CHILDHOOD

My uncle and aunt Todd lived farther away, at Seghill village, so I saw less of them than of the Waddles. They often supplied me with toys and playthings. My first pocket-knife was a gift of my uncle, while my aunt made me a kite, and showed me how to fly it. My uncle Todd was a big, powerful man, rather hot-tempered, but kindly, warm-hearted, and generous withal. He was very proud of the way in which I said grace before meat in those days. Once, when he had visitors, he wished to show off my accomplishments in that line. The table was quite bare, and my uncle Todd intended that this was to be a mere private rehearsal for the amusement or edification of the company. The chief performer, however, seemed to have other views, for, when called upon by my uncle to "ask a blessing," I looked along the empty table and exclaimed: "Very well, fetch the meat out, then," a request which was so reasonable that, amid some merriment, it met with a prompt response.

Now began my brief and rather fitful schooling. The whole period, when the many interruptions are deducted, could not have extended over more than two years. The first interruption was due to the outbreak of the miners' strike of 1844. I was then a little over six years of age, and had been at school only a few months. My first teacher was a Mrs. Campbell—wife of a pitman—who lived at Seghill village. Her equipment as a teacher would perhaps hardly come up to the Girton or Newnham standard, but to the Seghill urchins she was a lady of no mean accomplishments. Children of both sexes were among her pupils, the girls being taught to knit and sew in addition to the letters of the alphabet and easy reading-lessons. So far as I remember, writing and arithmetic were not included in her curriculum. Mrs. Campbell was a very thrifty, frugal dame, with strong domestic economic instincts. A sure way of

THOMAS BURT

winning her favour was for her pupils to gather feathers, and bring them to her every morning on their way to school. The feathers, I suppose, would ultimately be sold or utilized for the making of pillows and beds. She was not a strict disciplinarian; but when we needed personal chastisement her method of administering it was somewhat original. She was armed with a leathern strap—a pair of tawse—being a sort of miniature cat-o'-nine-tails, which she launched at, or towards, the offender. There the instrument would lie until it was required for a new culprit. By that time she had probably forgotten—if, indeed, she had ever known—who was the original culprit and what was his special offence. The unhappy child who carried the tawse to the teacher received the punishment. As her aim, woman-like, was not very precise, and as the shrewder, more old-fashioned, children always took care to shift the tawse near to some simple-minded new-comer, the probability was that the innocent suffered for the guilty—a sort of vicarious punishment which, I afterwards found, was not at all uncommon in human life.

After a few weeks of Mrs. Campbell's tuition I was transferred to the boys' school, then presided over by Mr. Anderson, assisted by his sons John and Samuel. Here I was initiated into the mysteries of writing, being shown how to make pot-hooks—"gibbey-sticks," as they were called by the boys. My recollections of Mr. Anderson are pleasant. He was patient, painstaking, and kind, and during the short time I was at his school I made fair progress in reading and writing.

CHAPTER II

LIFE IN THE COLLIERY VILLAGES

The Great Strike of 1844—Blacklegs and Candy-men—Eviction Incidents—An Aged Amazon—"Jake" Mills and his Keg of Powder—Mrs. Burt's Childhood—A Fight between Strikers and Blacklegs—Strike Privations—A Friend in Need—The Losses of the Strike—Mr. Burt's Father a "Marked Man."

THESE HALCYON DAYS were fast coming to an end. Sterner, more stirring, times were at hand. In the April of 1844 began the great pitmen's strike, one of the severest and most prolonged industrial battles that ever occurred in England or elsewhere. The strike extended over the whole of the counties of Northumberland and Durham. It affected more than 22,000 men and boys, and continued for seventeen weeks. Mutterings of the coming storm had been heard for some time before the actual outbreak, and to the pitmen and their wives the strike did not come as a sudden surprise. The first intimation to me of anything unusual was the crowds of women, youths, and children, who, armed with tin pans, "blazers,"¹ and other improvised cymbals, rushed down to the wagon-way every morning to greet the blacklegs² when in

¹ Blazers, or "bleezers," as they are commonly called, are thin sheets of iron, which, placed in front of the upper portion of the kitchen fireplace, exclude the cold air from direct access to the chimney, and thus assist the draught. They serve instead of bellows.

² The term "blackleg," as applied to men who continued at work during a strike, or who took the places of strikers, is said to have originated in the colliery districts, owing to these men appearing with their legs blackened with coal-dust, while the strikers' legs were clean. Until very

THOMAS BURT

transit between their homes by the side of the Tyne and the Cramlington pits.

Quickly afterwards followed the evictions. Nearly every house in Blake Town had its contents thrown upon the roadway in front of the Row. The evictors consisted of a regiment of ragged, ugly-looking, ill-bred, ill-mannered fellows, locally called "candy-men."¹ They had been collected from the slums of Newcastle and other towns on Tyneside. They were accompanied by a strong force of police armed with cutlasses and stout, formidable-looking staves. The policemen, for the most part, looked quietly on while the candy-men carried the furniture out of the houses. The crowd was good-natured—the men rather sullen, though quiet and peaceful, the women jeering and bantering the candy-men while they were shifting the household gods from their shrines. Active resistance there was none, nor was there violence. Amusing incidents were not wanting. In one house a stout, heavy old woman, enthroned in her arm-chair, planted herself in the middle of the floor, and, impervious alike to persuasion and remonstrance, refused to move. The puny, ill-fed candy-men were hardly capable of carrying such a load, even had the load been willing to be carried. That, however, was by no means the case. Armed with a thick rolling-pin, this amazon threatened to break the skull of the first man who came near her. For some time she kept the evicting force at bay, and delayed the proceedings. At length she showed signs of relenting. But,

recently all pitmen in Northumberland wore short breeches and always travelled to and from work with their legs partly exposed. In this connection the term would gain pungency through being a commonly accepted title for race-course swindlers and card-sharpers.

¹ The candy-men at that time made a living by collecting rags, bones, etc., in exchange for which they gave candy. They were a dirty, blackguardly lot, and were looked down upon by the miners. The denizens of the slums who were engaged as evictors, being of the same type as the candy-men, and, indeed, numbering many candy-men in their ranks, were all so designated by the pitmen and their families.

LIFE IN THE COLLIERY VILLAGES

having some notion of the pomp befitting her and the occasion, she would not allow the candy-men to touch her or her arm-chair. Selecting two young, strapping policemen from the crowd, she intimated that they might, if they so desired, have the honour of carrying her out-of-doors. These stalwarts, entering into the fun of the situation, promptly came forward and carried her outside, amid the applause of the assemblage.

Though the evictions proceeded smoothly and quietly for the most part, yet obstacles more formidable than the fat old woman presented were sometimes encountered. Some of the pitmen had strongly and skilfully barricaded their doors and windows from inside, and before an entrance could be effected the doors and windows had to be broken in pieces.

The evictions had their humours, some of them belonging to the comedy sort such as I have described, others of a grimmer character. Practical jokes were not infrequently played upon the unsuspecting candy-men. A well-authenticated story is told of Jacob Mills. Jacob, or "Jake," as he was familiarly called by his comrades, was a fellow-workman of mine at Choppington in the last few years of my pit life. He was a thoroughly honest, brave, straight-forward man, gifted with a vein of fun and quiet humour which made him a great favourite with everybody. He was a devoted trade unionist, and had been so all his life. When I knew him he was advanced in years, yet hale, hearty, humorous as ever. In his youth he had been a strong, active, vigorous man, perhaps too much inclined to use physical force for the settlement of his differences. When ordinary arguments failed, Jake did not hesitate to fight for union principles, being, like Sir Hudibras, ever ready to

Prove his doctrine orthodox,
By apostolic blows and knocks.

THOMAS BURT

Jake's fame had gone abroad, and the candy-men expected no child's-play when his turn came for eviction. To their surprise and delight, they found nothing in the way. No barricades had been erected ; there was an open door, Jake even saluting the evictors with a hearty word of welcome. All this looked well. One of the candy-men, indeed, had his curiosity excited when he noticed a red-hot poker in the fire. Before he had time to ask any questions, Jake brought from under the bed a quarter-barrel of powder, which he placed in the middle of the floor. Then, seizing the poker, he called out to his wife : "Tyek the bairns along the road : aw'm gannin' to hell wi' the bums." The "bums," not being inclined to embark on such a voyage, promptly took to their heels, and Jake's eviction was postponed till another day.¹

But, apart from these lighter interludes, such evictions are always touchingly pathetic, sometimes almost tragic. Hundreds of helpless children cast upon the bare, shelterless roads ; the mothers standing disconsolately beside their household goods, their whole earthly possessions, in which they took such pride, and which represented the toil, struggles, and savings of many thrifty years—this presented a picture at once sombre and pitiful. Friends and sympathisers were not lacking among the farmers and shopkeepers, who generously shared their houses with the evicted families. But the very magnitude of the evictions, extending over nearly the whole of the mining districts of Northumberland and Durham, made it impossible to find house accommodation for a twentieth part of the evicted. Scores of the Seghill families camped out by the roadside between that village and the Avenue

¹ To the uninitiated this story of the powder being kept under the bed may seem improbable. As a matter of fact, it was not at all uncommon at the time referred to, and for many years afterwards, for the pitmen to stow their powder under the bed. Many a sound sleep have I had with a powder-cask under me.

LIFE IN THE COLLIERY VILLAGES

Head. The scene was novel and picturesque. No small degree of architectural taste and skill were exhibited in arranging the household furniture so as to afford the utmost shelter to the inmates.

We were fortunate enough, as I have mentioned, to obtain a cottage of farmer Duxfield's at the Avenue Head. There were but two rooms, both very small. Into these, besides my father and mother, my brother (then about two years old), and myself, there were my uncles and aunts Waddle, and Thomas and Mary Weatherburn, with their infant daughter, Mary, a child of eighteen or twenty months old. The greater part of the furniture belonging to these three families was stowed in the granaries and barns. A small rent of 1s. 6d. or 2s. per week was paid for this accommodation. [I may parenthetically remark that I took great notice of the afore-mentioned little Mary Weatherburn. I rocked her cradle, wheeled her coach—a little home-made, roughly constructed perambulator—and otherwise showed my interest in her welfare. This somewhat precocious courtship was followed many years afterwards by Mary becoming my loving, faithful, devoted wife. She has repaid to me a thousand times over any small attentions I may have paid to her in those early days.]

Meanwhile the strike dragged its slow length along. Day followed day, weeks grew into months, and still no settlement came. The long struggle was for the most part tame and uneventful. Mass meetings and demonstrations now and then varied the monotony. From Seaton Delaval, close by, there came one day a startling rumour of riot and disturbance. It was said that several men had been killed. The real facts were less grave, though there had really been a severe encounter between strikers and blacklegs. Stones had been thrown, pickshafts had been freely used, and in the *mêlée* one or two

THOMAS BURT

persons had been slightly injured. But, for the most part, the conduct of the miners throughout was quiet, orderly, and law-abiding.

For myself I had not a bad time of it during the strike. There was no school to torment me. The absence of playfellows of my own age was a drawback. Yet time did not hang heavily on my hands. I had free scope to run about wherever I liked. I roamed through the fields with the Duxfields. They allowed me to ride their horses sometimes on the way to and from their ploughing. I watched the workers, male and female, at the haymaking and in the varying operations of the farm. Of how we fared and fed I have no distinct recollection. Our mode of living had always been plain and frugal; and now, whatever else might be lacking, there was always bread enough to eat. The fresh air and active exercise no doubt sharpened the appetite, and gave keener relish than any sauce or condiment could have given.

My parents had their anxieties and struggles. They were scrupulously honest. They shrank from debt as from dishonour and slavery. Heretofore they had always been able to pay their way. They began their married life with little or no money, yet in spite of my father's feeble health they had managed by dint of industry and thrift to furnish their house comfortably in the style usual with the better class of colliery folk of their time. Though free from debt when the strike began, they had little or no savings to fall back upon. Now their income, scanty at its best, was entirely cut off. To add to their difficulties, the strike had barely commenced when the provision merchant with whom they had dealt for many years suddenly failed. Without money, without immediate prospect of getting money, what was to be done? My mother—shy, sensitive, proud, high-spirited—could not go to beg for credit from shop-

LIFE IN THE COLLIERY VILLAGES

keepers who had never received her ready money. I have said my mother, for it is upon the woman, however well mated she may be, that the responsibility of getting in the family provisions devolves. My father, too, was quite as proud as my mother, and perhaps even more shy and sensitive. In this crisis a timely benefactor came to the rescue. Mr. Hodgson, a miller and provision merchant of Blyth, spontaneously called upon my mother and generously offered to supply her with everything she required. This friendly offer was gratefully accepted, and to the end of the strike Mr. Hodgson supplied us without stint, his only complaint being that my mother was too modest in her orders and requirements. It took months—years, indeed—of hard work before the debt thus incurred was paid off. But the kindly Mr. Hodgson only expressed surprise that it was paid off so soon, and I well remember the jubilation of my father and mother when they were once more free from the thralldom of debt—a freedom which they ever afterwards enjoyed to the end of their lives.

When a small, thrifty family like ours had to go into debt, it may easily be conceived what the condition of those with large families, less favourably situated and less provident, would be. Destitution, hunger, famine prevailed in many quarters. Everybody was out of money, and great numbers could get no credit. A committee was formed consisting of the most steady, trustworthy, and trusted of the miners, who undertook to find food for the most necessitous of the families. This committee guaranteed that the tradesmen who supplied goods would be paid. My father was one of this little band. I know what anxiety the responsibility gave him. The risk was great, and, being in debt himself, he could ill afford to incur fresh liabilities. How it all ended I know not; but, as I heard nothing further of

THOMAS BURT

the matter after the strike terminated, I conclude that the persons on whose behalf my father and his co-trustees pledged themselves honourably paid their debts, or had them cancelled by the shopkeepers.

Towards the end of July the strike terminated. The struggle had been long and severe, lasting for about seventeen weeks. From sheer necessity the miners were compelled to accept the coal-owners' terms. Costly, too, as well as severe, had been the contest. The loss of the employers was roughly estimated at £200,000 sterling, and that of the miners, in wages, at £300,000. There were other losses—less palpable, indeed, but not less real—which could not be measured by ordinary standards of value.

It would be out of place here to discuss the merits of the strike. Perhaps the miners were ill-advised to enter upon it. Faults there might be, and probably were, on both sides. Both were, perhaps, to be pitied as well as blamed. One thing is certain: the condition of the miners at the time was extremely bad. Their work was hard, their hours were long, and their pay was small. Heavy fines were constantly inflicted in the most arbitrary way. At the beginning of the conflict the miners tried to effect a settlement by conciliatory means. With that object they appealed to the Coal-owners' Association. Their memorial was not even acknowledged. As to the actual wage received by the miners at the time—a point of some importance—there were controversies between the spokesmen of the workmen and the employers. The Coalowners' Committee publicly asserted that the hewers could earn 3s. 8d. per day, while the men's representatives declared that the actual average wage was a shilling a day less than that. The two statements, though wide apart, were not absolutely contradictory. What the coalowners thought the miners

LIFE IN THE COLLIERY VILLAGES

could earn, and what they actually received as wages, might be very different amounts. Making allowance for the tendency to exaggerate on the one side and to minimize on the other, allowing, too, for fines and deductions, the difference is not so great as at first sight it appears. Whatever the facts were, the wages were admittedly low, and, as the employment at many collieries was very irregular, the annual amount received for the maintenance of the workman and his family must have been extremely inadequate. At Seghill, from conversations I heard between my father and uncles, 4s. a day was deemed an exceptionally high wage for a coal-hewer, an amount which was reached only by the strongest, most skilful, or best-situated workmen.

At the end of the strike my father found himself a marked man. When the miners went to seek re-employment he was rejected. Mr. Charles Carr, then one of the owners and acting-manager of Seghill Colliery, told him frankly that the refusal to re-engage him was due solely to the active part he had taken in the affairs of the union. Mr. Carr acknowledged that my father was an honest, industrious, good workman, whose character and intelligence he thoroughly recognized. My father always spoke in the highest terms of Mr. Carr as an employer, and, though naturally hurt at the hard treatment now meted out to him, he greatly appreciated the honesty and straightforwardness of his employer in assigning the true reason for this treatment. It was so much more manly than the common method of attacking the character of the man who was to be victimized. To show that Mr. Carr had no objection to my father as a workman, but simply as a trade unionist, he agreed to re-employ him on condition that he would promise to abstain from active intervention in union affairs. My father, of course, declined to enter into any engagement

THOMAS BURT

that would fetter his freedom of action. Ultimately he was employed unconditionally, and, being hard pressed by circumstances, he was glad for a time to accept work at Seghill. Rightly or wrongly, however, he thought his position there was very precarious, and he lost no time in seeking employment elsewhere.

CHAPTER III

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS

Removal to Durham—The First and Only Recitation—A Great Snow—Struggle with a Snowdrift—An Unreasonable Schoolmaster—A Tragicomedy on Ice—Abrupt Close of Schooldays—The Key of Knowledge attained—Starting Life in the Coal-pit—Childrens' Long Days in the Mines.

IN THE MIDDLE of the winter following the strike we removed to Elemore Colliery, in the County of Durham. For the next five or six years we lived in various parts of that county. My father had become very unsettled. We flitted about from place to place. The little family barque, once adrift, was tossed hither and thither on the troubled waters. Our stay at Elemore was brief, eight or ten months. While there we lived at Easington Lane, in a part known as the Brick Garth, so designated because close by there was a large brick manufactory. Here I had a serious illness, some fever which laid me low, and brought me to the verge of death. Recovery was slow. When I was restored to health I was sent to the school of Mr. Richardson—"Willie Richardson," as he was called. Willie was an old friend of my father's. He had been a pitman, and, though he was probably very imperfectly educated himself, and not much ahead of his more advanced pupils, he was very conscientious and painstaking, and did his best to teach the young idea how to shoot. On Sundays I attended the Primitive Methodist Sunday-

THOMAS BURT

school. There, on the occasion of the anniversary celebration, I made my *début* as a reciter. Though I continued to take part in the Sunday-schools, as pupil or teacher, till my early manhood, this was my first and last performance of the kind. Not that I failed. On the contrary, it is said that I did my little part very creditably. Certainly I gave great satisfaction to my admiring parents. There had been some slight controversy, not unfriendly, between the Sunday-school superintendent and my father as to the selection of the piece. The former had chosen some jingling rhyme of a goody-goody kind, poor and empty enough, I dare say, but not on that account unattractive to the juvenile taste. I rather liked it. My father's view was different. "That won't do," he said emphatically. "I'll get him a short piece out of the Bible." The chapter selected by my father was the 35th of Isaiah, beginning: "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them: and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." The superintendent objected—not perhaps unreasonably—that there were too many "hard words" for a child of my age and training. "I'll drill him," said my father. "Let him have something that is worth saying." When I now read that fine prose poem, with its beauty and majesty, with its rhythm, its music, and its melody, I see that my father, who had never been at college and only a few weeks at school, must have known a good thing when he saw it. Apart from any religious lesson the chapter may contain, I feel grateful to him for having thus early placed before me such a model of strong, lofty, melodious prose. If I did but scant justice to the piece, and if I have not taken full advantage of the object-lesson, the fault was not my father's, but my own.

Towards the end of 1845 we removed to the Blue House, a hamlet consisting of a little wayside inn and two cottages about midway between Shotton and Haswell Collieries.

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS

At the latter place my father worked, following his usual occupation, that of a coal-hewer. The winter we spent at the Blue House was very severe. There was a snow-storm, the heaviest I remember to have seen. For several weeks the roads were utterly blocked. Our little community was like a beleagured city, with its means of escape obstructed and its food-supplies cut off. Ultimately, gangs of workmen were employed to cut a way through the snowdrifts on the main roads, but the field-paths and byways remained for long impassable.

I had here a somewhat risky adventure. It was part of my business night and morning to go for the milk to neighbouring farms. The storm had for a time put a stop to these excursions. Milk being a very important article of diet in our little household, after the storm had somewhat abated I suggested that I might resume my milk-carrying operations. My mother demurred, urging that the snow was still too thick upon the ground for me to undertake the journey. At length I persuaded her to let me go, promising to return if I found the difficulties too great. The farm was perhaps three-quarters of a mile distant, part of the road being by an unfrequented byway and the rest through fields. For a few hundred yards I got along fairly well. The snow lay thick, but, as it was partially frozen, I managed to struggle on, seldom sinking deeper than my knees. Presently, however, I came to a thick snowdrift, where the roadside hedges were completely covered for a great distance, and where it was impossible to see any outline of the road. Here prudence would have suggested that I should have returned. But to go home without having accomplished my mission would have been too humiliating. I boldly went forward. At first the snow bore my weight, and I did not sink to any inconvenient depth; but suddenly I went plump down almost to the chin. It was some time before I

THOMAS BURT

could extricate myself. My little milk-can was useful as a scooping-tool to clear away the snow. By dint of hard work and resolution I at last pulled myself out of danger. The worst of the journey was now over, and I reached the farm, rather to the surprise, as I remember, of the farmer's wife. My mother had been very anxious at my long absence, and, I need not say, gave me a warm welcome on my return home. I thought at the time, and I still think, that I then had a narrow escape from being lost in the snow. Had the weather not been calm, had the snow still been falling or drifting, and, I may add, had I been less active and determined, I should not have reached home alive.

From the Blue House the nearest school was at Haswell Colliery, rather more than a mile away. The severity of the winter had greatly interrupted my attendance, and, indeed, apart from climatic and other extraneous difficulties, my school experience at Haswell was not altogether happy or successful. I had been but a few weeks at school when I had a serious difference with the master. Probably I was at fault, and yet, as this was the first and only conflict of the kind I ever had, I fancy the master himself was not altogether blameless. No doubt the rough colliery urchins sadly tried his temper, and his temper was not one of the serenest and most amiable. His name I quite forget, but, after an interval of more than seventy years, I vividly remember his character and appearance. Nature had not dealt kindly with him either in shaping his person or forming his disposition. He was a slightly built, red-haired, towsey-headed, knock-kneed—or, as we used to term it, “knacky-kneed”—little man. His temper, like his head, was rough, gingery, fiery. He ran no risk of spoiling his scholars by sparing the rod. In truth, he had quite a collection of instruments of torture, among which were a formidable cane and a huge leathern strap,

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS

the latter being reserved for the edification of the bigger and more unruly boys. Into this last-named category I fear I must have been justly placed. I had been but a few days at his school before every appliance he possessed had been tried upon me. The slightest offence provoked him to wrath, and his punishments bore no proportion to the offence. I soon discovered that those who cried soonest and loudest got off best; but this discovery availed me little, since I had rather prematurely got the notion into my head that it was cowardly and craven to cry and whine in the presence of the scholars. I had not been accustomed to personal chastisement, and the sense of injustice which rankled in my mind wounded me even more deeply than his blows. I am surprised that the dominie's pupils did not break out in open rebellion. All the bigger boys hated him, and at one time, indeed, a scheme was afoot to join forces against him. In this intended revolt I was a ringleader, but nothing came of it. There was constant war, secret or open, between teacher and scholars. A rather ludicrous incident brought matters to a climax so far as I was concerned, and ended in my peremptory dismissal from the school.

The weather was still wintry, and a hard frost prevailed. The master proposed a skating excursion. There was to be a holiday for a portion of an afternoon, and meanwhile the stronger boys were ordered to clear the snow from a pond close by. The boys were hilarious at the prospect of an outing. The dominie, too, was in one of his most gracious moods, and everything looked well for a pleasant afternoon. From the beginning all eyes were turned upon the master, everybody wishing to see what figure he would cut on the ice. It soon became apparent that his skating was purely tentative and experimental. He was not an expert; in fact, he had never before, apparently, had skates upon his feet. The result was what might

THOMAS BURT

have been expected. Apart from his inexperience, his structural conformation, as indeed, his mathematical knowledge should have told him, was most unfavourable to the maintenance of his equilibrium upon such a slippery foundation. At the very offset his legs flew from under him, and he sprawled, a helpless object, on the ice. Children have a keen sense of the ridiculous, and even the dread of their teacher could not prevent them from indulging in a loud outburst of laughter. In this hilarious chorus I was probably not the least loud and prominent. The plucky little man, for he was not destitute of courage, made many a gallant effort to get upon his legs again, always without success. In imperious tones, certainly not those of a suppliant, he called me and another boy to assist him. Whether it was his peremptory demand or the memory of his past cruelties that prompted my refusal I know not, but I certainly refused. Ultimately, some of the boys took off his skates, and the first use of his legs when he reached *terra firma* was to make a dash for me, no doubt to administer what he deemed well-merited punishment. But I was too nimble for him. I was a good runner and he was not. The skating expedition having thus abruptly terminated, we were ordered back to school in no angelic mood, having been defrauded of a portion of our expected holiday. Knowing that my conduct had been bad, and feeling sure that I would be severely punished, I went direct home instead of returning to school. Next morning I turned up as usual, not without dread; but instead of punishing me, as I expected, the master told me to gather up my books and go home, since he wanted nothing more to do with me. For once we were agreed, I fully reciprocating his sentiments. So we parted with mutual satisfaction, if not with mutual respect and goodwill.

Practically, this brought to an end my short and fitful

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS

school-days. I did, indeed, return for a few weeks to Willie Richardson's school at Easington Lane, where I was cordially welcomed alike by master and scholars. As this change of school involved travelling six miles a day to and fro, my attendance was somewhat irregular. Except for a few hours at a night-school some years afterwards, I received no further assistance from living teachers. Since the night-school tuition followed a long and hard day's work underground, the pupil was hardly in the fittest condition of mind or body to profit by the teaching. When deductions are made for interruptions by strikes, sickness, and other unavoidable causes, I could not have been altogether more than a year and a half or two years at school. Something, however—indeed, much—had been accomplished. I had, very imperfectly no doubt, learned to read, write, and do easy sums in arithmetic. The key of knowledge had thus been put into my hands, and the use I was to make of it depended largely upon myself.

By this time I had become a big boy—big for my age, for I was just verging upon my tenth birthday. I was tired of school and eager for work, thinking it was my duty to add to the scanty family income. My parents wished me to continue at school a year or two longer, though I fancy they must have seen that further progress there was unlikely. From conversations I overheard, I learned that their belief was that I should soon become more sick of pit-work than I had ever been of school, and when that time came their plan was to afford me another opportunity of resuming my schooling. My father at last agreed that when I had completed my tenth year I should be allowed to go into the pit. By a recent Act of Parliament, ten was the earliest age at which boys could go underground. My father still hesitating to obtain work for me, I went to the overman myself to seek employment. After asking me a question or two, the overman

THOMAS BURT

said he wanted lads, and, as I was certainly old enough and big enough, I might start as a trapper-boy the following day. Finding me so resolute, my father and mother acquiesced, and accordingly, without more ado, I commenced my underground life in Haswell Pit on November 13, 1847, the day after the completion of my tenth year.

My father's turn had now come for a colliery house, and we shifted to Haswell Colliery. This gave me the advantage of nearness to the pit, and made the working hours less oppressive than they otherwise would have been. As yet there was no limit by law to the working day of pit-boys. Nominally the hours were twelve per day; but, as the time counted from the working place, and not, as now, from bank to bank, and as there was a tendency to stretch the time at the beginning and end of the day, the actual hours from the surface were nearer thirteen than twelve. This, though far from an ideal condition, was a great improvement on the past. A single generation had shown great progress. My father commenced work before he was eight years of age. His hours were unrestricted by custom or by law, and ranged from fourteen to eighteen, according to the state of trade. In 1840 the inquiries of a Royal Commission revealed terrible evils and cruelties in the underground life of the country. Children of both sexes, and of the tenderest age, from five to eight, were kept in the pits for sixteen hours at a stretch. But the spirit of reform was abroad, and a brighter day was about to dawn. Lord Ashley, better known as Lord Shaftesbury, had raised his eloquent voice and begun his beneficent labours on behalf of the operatives in factory and mine. One of the greatest poets of the time, Mrs. Browning, had written her soul-stirring appeal, "The Cry of the Children"—a poem which accomplished as much for the emancipation of the

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS

miner's child as did Hood's "Song of a Shirt" for the needlewomen of London. Five years before my advent into the mines an Act had been passed fixing ten as the minimum age for boys to commence work, and entirely prohibiting the employment of females underground. But, by the connivance of employers and employed, the provision relating to females was not even yet enforced. In Durham and Northumberland women had not, within living memory, been employed underground, although in a few places in the county of Durham they continued to work on the pit-heads up to the end of the eighteenth and the first few years of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER IV

BOYS' WORK IN THE COAL-PIT

Changes for the Better in Coal-working—A Dangerous Pit—The Perils of Coal-dust—First Feelings Underground—A Trapper-boy's Work—The Consequence of Sleeping on Duty—A Pleasing Promotion—"Spanker": A Character Sketch—"Lady," a Pit Pony—A Famous Methodist Preacher—The Two Peters—Preacher and M.P.—A Narrow Escape from a Terrible Death.

MY PIT LIFE began during a period of transition. Great reforms were being made in the methods of carrying on colliery operations, especially in the transit of the coal from the face of the workings to the surface. Almost everywhere the cage and the tub were taking the place of the hook and the corf. On the main roads the hauling-engine was largely superseding the horse, and near the coal-face the hand-putter was giving place to the pony-putter. Haswell was, I believe, the first pit in which cages were introduced. Besides other advantages, this made ingress and egress for men and boys much safer and easier than in olden times. Formerly, in going down and coming up the shaft, they had to cling to the chain or rope as best they could, at great discomfort and at no small peril to life and limb.

Though Haswell had taken the initiative in this salutary change, the evolutionary process there was still far from complete. At the time when I commenced work there were no ponies near the coal-face, the haulage being done by young men called hand-putters, as contradistinguished from the pony-putters, who now, as a rule, perform that

BOYS' WORK IN THE COAL-PIT

kind of work. When the putters brought the full tubs to the flat, or station, the tubs were placed upon rolleys and taken to the shaft, part of the way by horses and the rest along an engine plane. The putters were active, powerful young men. Strength, agility, energy, and endurance were needed, since the work was excessively hard and the hours were very long. Where the gradients were heavy, assistants, called helpers-up, were stationed to help the putters. The helpers-up were either strong lads, or, where the incline was extra steep, donkeys, or, as we called them, "cuddies," did the helping up. Near the coal-face the work of the boys was door-keeping, way-cleaning, helping-up, or donkey-driving. The novice, as a rule, started as a door-keeper, or "trapper-boy." As he gained strength and experience he went on successively to horse-driving, way-cleaning, putting, and coal-hewing.

Haswell Pit, at the time I commenced work there, had an evil reputation for danger. A fearful explosion had occurred only a year or two before, in which ninety-five lives were lost. Melancholy memorials of that catastrophe were visible in the form of many widows and fatherless children in the village. Not a few of the workmen were in constant nervous trepidation lest there should be a recurrence of a similar calamity. There was a good deal of gas in the pit, and the workings were, for the most part, dry and dusty. Coal-dust had not then, as it has now, been so fully recognized as a source of danger in mines.

Suspicious had, indeed, been long entertained, and hints had often been thrown out by practical mining authorities. Mr. Buddle, a well-known mining engineer, so far back as the Wallsend Colliery disaster of 1803, had declared it as his opinion that coal-dust was one of the chief factors in causing the explosion. But it was in the inquiry

THOMAS BURT

that followed the Haswell explosion, in 1844, that Faraday and Lyell, with true scientific instinct, first demonstrated the important part that coal-dust had played in aggravating and extending the injurious effects of the explosion. Yet fifty more years were to elapse, thousands more lives were to be sacrificed, before these views were accepted as facts, and before practical steps were taken to diminish or take away the risk. Here at Haswell Colliery I learned what a panic is long before I knew there was such a word in the English language. One day there came a startling rumour that the pit had fired. Everybody rushed towards the shaft. Happily it was a false alarm, but it was a long time before men and boys could settle themselves down to their ordinary avocations.

Such was the new world into which I was ushered. Once before I had been on a short underground visit to the pit, under the care and supervision of my father. But now, a shy, sensitive boy, I was thrown—or, rather, had voluntarily rushed—into fortune's way to take my part, as best I could, in the rough conflicts of daily pit life. The clatter, the bustle and confusion, the darkness, relieved only by the glimmering, flickering lamps, the men and boys flitting hither and thither, resembling grim shadows rather than human figures—all this seemed a fantastic dream, novel and bewildering. To direct the air-currents of the mine, doors were placed at certain points, and it was my business to tend one of these, to open and shut it when the putters passed through on their way to the workings and on their return journey to the flat, or station. The trapper's hours, as I have said, were nominally twelve, really about thirteen, a day; his pay was tenpence a day, and he was expected to remain at his post the whole time in total darkness. There was a good deal of passage through my door, the putters with their tubs, empty and laden, men and boys going back-

BOYS' WORK IN THE COAL-PIT

wards and forwards. This relieved the monotony, though exciting incidents were few. There were occasional stoppages in the work, sometimes for rather long periods. The dulness and loneliness were then oppressive. Of one incident in my trapper-boy days I have a vivid recollection. During a temporary lull in the work I had fallen into a sound sleep. When I awoke I found, to my amazement, that my door had disappeared. There was a rather steep descent from the coal-face to my door, down which the putters rushed their tubs at times with great velocity. As I had failed to open my door, the tub had struck it with tremendous violence, and carried it some distance down the roadway. The first intimation I had that anything was wrong was the sound of the putter's voice swearing with great eloquence and volubility. This in itself was nothing unusual, and I did not connect the profanity with any culpability of my own. But I soon discovered that the missing door had been carried away, and had thrown the putter's tub off the rails. The "deputy" had to be sent for to patch and re-erect the door. I was in great distress, fearing that I might be dismissed from my work. The fault was, indeed, a serious one, and might have been followed by very grave consequences. Beyond a severe admonition, however, which I certainly richly deserved, I received no punishment.

After working a few weeks as a trapper, I was transferred to donkey-driving. This, surely, was swift and real promotion. My pay rose at a bound from tenpence to the full round sum of a shilling a day. Instead of tending a dead, wooden thing, I was entrusted with—I had almost said the management and guidance of—a living creature endowed with more or less feeling and intelligence. I was in great glee. The higher pay was something, but to me the donkey was the main thing. From my childhood I had been fond of animals, and my highest joys had

THOMAS BURT

been derived from the donkey-rides which I had borrowed or stolen. "Spanker"—"Old Spanker," as he was always called—was the name of the marvellous animal thus committed to my charge. The horse-keeper, on delivering him over to me, had expatiated on his merits, especially emphasizing his quietness and good-nature. Such a testimonial was certainly well deserved. Spanker had, indeed, all the virtues of his race—meekness, patience, forbearance. Under the harshest treatment, under the severest provocation, he never lost his temper : he neither bit nor kicked, nor did he indulge in any other wicked propensities. In his display of the more passive virtues of the Christian character this quadruped shamed many of the proud bipeds around him. All this it is but just to say. Yet I had my difficulties. Spanker would not go unless he liked—and he seldom liked. Hard work was his aversion, and yet that was precisely what he and I were appointed to do. The place where we had to "help-up" was very steep. Its heaviest part extended only some twenty or thirty paces ; but there the combined strength of the putter, pushing behind the tub, and Spanker pulling in front, was needed. The roadway was not only steep : it was very low and narrow ; in fact, the tub so completely filled the whole space—top, bottom, and sides—that a moderately sized cat could hardly have squeezed itself past. When the putter brought his full tub to the bottom of the bank, called in pit jargon the "hitch," it was my business to attach the donkey's traces to the tub, and it was Spanker's business to pull with all his might. There was no place for me to ride, nor was there room between the tub and the donkey for me to walk, without danger. I was compelled, therefore, to go in front and lead him. My first day I shall never forget. For awhile, in the early morning, Spanker buckled to with a will and did his work fairly well ; but

BOYS' WORK IN THE COAL-PIT

the monotony of the heavy pulling seemed to pall upon him. At length he struck work, and was immovable. He had meekly enough allowed me to attach his traces to the tub, but a step forward he would not go. I did all I could by leading and pulling him. Coaxing, and even threatening language I used. All in vain. He was not amenable to moral suasion, and I had neither goad nor whip with which to encourage him onward. Sometimes now I suspect that he hardly understood me. My vocabulary was altogether too feeble and poverty-stricken for Spanker, who had been accustomed to hear strong language. I could not swear—at least, I was not in the habit of swearing—just then. The putter, whose name and whose temper was Short, it is true made amends for my deficiencies. He swore with zeal and emphasis, sometimes at me, sometimes at Spanker, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against us. But then he was effectually imprisoned behind the tub, and Spanker knew, if Short did not, that the longer the work was stopped, the longer delayed would be the punishment which was sure to follow. Some of the hewers, whose work was interrupted, now came out of their working places to see what was the matter. They suggested that Spanker should be taken out of the way, and that by their united strength they would push the tub up the hill. Accordingly I detached the traces; but whether the animal failed to understand that he was relieved from further duty, or whether it was sheer stubbornness that possessed him, I know not, but he still obstinately refused to move a step forward, even when the tub was pushed against him. When at last I got Spanker out of the way, Short administered a severe—I might say, a merciless, though hardly an unprovoked—chastisement. I well remember that, after belabouring the poor brute with a tramway sleeper, Short returned a second time to the

THOMAS BURT

charge because he imagined that the ass had insulted him by mocks and jeers. Spanker did, indeed, as I can testify, utter a loud whinney—loud, certainly, and, so far as I could judge, absolutely impenitent, if not jubilant, in its tone.

My day's work over, when I told my sorrows and difficulties to my father, he saw at once that I must be properly armed to battle with this sea of troubles. It was clear that an ordinary whip would be lost on Spanker. A stout cudgel, something like an Irishman's shillelah, was therefore prepared by my father out of a cast-away pick-shaft. Thus equipped, I set out more cheerfully to work next morning. I made, too, what proved to be a most important tactical change. Boldly facing all risks, I went to the other end of Spanker, placing myself between him and the tub instead of walking in front, as I had done heretofore. I was still reluctant to use my cudgel, but, under the new régime there was little need to do so. One or two smart applications sufficed. When the ass discovered that I was duly armed, and ready to use my weapon, he became at once a reformed character. Henceforth he accepted me as his master, and my troubles with him were now at an end.

Before I take final leave of Spanker, I should like to note an interesting fact in natural history. Whether the said animal would be accepted as typical of the asinine brotherhood generally I do not know, but he had one striking characteristic. Stiff, infirm, aged as he was, or seemed to be ordinarily, there was no holding him back when the day's work was over. He then galloped full speed "out-bye" to the stables, permitting neither fellow-donkey, pony, or other living thing to pass him on the way.

Spanker and I had been mates only a few weeks when I was ordered into the night-shift to drive a pony. Lady,

BOYS' WORK IN THE COAL-PIT

for that was her name and title, was a thorough contrast to Spanker. She was smart, spirited, active—active not only on her way to the stables, but at all times. She was a strong, willing worker, and I was amazed at her tractableness and sagacity. She would come and go at my bidding, and I verily believed that she understood every word that I said to her. My cudgel was now thrown aside; whip, nor spur, nor goad was needed for Lady. If she had a fault, it was that she was too high-strung and sensitive. She and I got on excellently together.

Ponies were few in Haswell pit then, and Lady was a great favourite with the boys. That was not wholly to her advantage. Her very virtues, as indeed not infrequently happens with the four-footed as well as with the human animal, sometimes led to her being imposed upon. She was often called upon to work double shift. In those days, I may remark, pit ponies, horses, and donkeys were often treated with scant sympathy and consideration. Thoughtlessness, heedlessness, it was perhaps mostly, rather than positive intentional cruelty and ill-usage. While at their work the poor animals seldom had anything to eat or drink. It was the exception rather than the rule for food and water to be provided for them in the workings. Often had I, when in the night-shift, to wait for a donkey or pony to return from one hard day's work in order that I might take it to perform another. After a short rest and a feed of corn, the poor tired beast was sent once more to its daily and nightly toil. The better the animal, the more likely was this to happen. Lady often had to do double duty, Spanker never. I sometimes thought Spanker's tricks and his faculty for shamming, which was truly consummate, had been partly forced upon him by hard usage, and that underground life at Haswell had taught him that virtue is not always its own reward.

THOMAS BURT

While at Haswell, there worked in the pit beside me a young man who afterwards became famous as a Wesleyan Methodist preacher. Peter Mackenzie was, I should say, ten or twelve years my senior. He was a putter at the flat where I was a trapper-boy. Well do I remember him, for he was even then stamped with a character and an individuality all his own. He was a strapping, active fellow, with great strength of will and of limb, and was of Scottish accent. As yet he had not joined the Methodists; and, I believe, in after years, he was wont to describe himself as a sinner of the deepest dye before his conversion. The worst I remember of him is that he indulged in great freedom of expletives. Peter never did anything by halves. His swearing was certainly extraordinary, even among the Haswell putters, for its pith and pungency. All the putters swore, according to their respective capacities. When I first came across the phrase, "he swore like a trooper," I suggested to my father that "trooper" must surely be a misprint for "putter." Peter Mackenzie was very like his fellow-putters, only he excelled them in impressiveness of diction. Swearing is a bad, vulgar, vicious practice, but it is not inconsistent with good and even noble qualities. Of these noble qualities Peter Mackenzie always had great store. He was truthful, honest, warm-hearted, generous, ever gentle and kindly in his ways. With the smaller boys he was a great favourite, ready always not only to protect them from ill-usage, but also to give them a cheerful word and a helping hand. Of Peter Mackenzie I have nothing but pleasant and kindly memories.

I remember an incident connected with Mr. Mackenzie and my father which, though small in itself, did credit to both the Peters. When Peter Mackenzie commenced to hew coals he was sent for a few days to work with my father. On the pay day the whole of the money earned

BOYS' WORK IN THE COAL-PIT

was paid to my father, to be divided by him. I was sent to Haswell Lane, where Peter then lived, with his share of the money. On counting it, Peter said there was a mistake : my father had sent too much. He had divided the money equally, and as he, Mackenzie, was only a learner, he should have received less than a skilled workman like my father. He commanded me, therefore, to take back part of the money, which he handed to me. "No," said I, "my father won't have it. I heard him say that you were stronger than he, and a good, willing worker ; that you had done your full share of the work, and were entitled to half the money."

Many years elapsed before I again met Mr. Mackenzie. He had become eminent and beloved as a Methodist preacher, and I had been returned as M.P. for Morpeth. Mr. Mackenzie was to lecture on some subject—temperance, I think—in Bewick Street Chapel, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and I was asked to be chairman. At the conclusion of the lecture, Mr. Mackenzie moved a vote of thanks to the chairman, remarking, after some friendly words, that we had both been pit-lads ; had both become, in different spheres, public men ; but, strangely enough, this was the first occasion on which we had met.

In responding to the vote of thanks, I quietly corrected the mistake, observing that he and my father had worked together at Haswell pit, and that I was a trapper-boy there when he was a putter. The scene that followed was dramatic. When I was still speaking, Mr. Mackenzie, with characteristic warm-heartedness and impulsiveness, sprang to his feet, threw his arms around me, literally hugging me to his heart, at the same time crying out : "God bless the lad ! Are you the son of Peter Burt ? He was one of the best men I ever knew."

Before I take leave of Haswell, I ought to mention that I had been only a few days at work when I had a

THOMAS BURT

narrow escape from a terrible death. It happened thus : At the end of the day's work hewers, putters, drivers and trappers hurried to the shaft bottom, and crowded there in large numbers before they were permitted to ride to bank. There was much noise, pushing, and confusion, everyone being eager to reach the surface as soon as possible. The men as a rule allowed the boys to go up first. The putters—the younger, the more active of the men—used to climb upon the top of the cage and thus ride to bank. When the ascending cage reached the surface it was stopped for them to get off, the descending cage being therefore arrested before it reached its place at the bottom of the shaft.

I was standing in front of a large crowd waiting to go to bank. The light was imperfect. Somebody behind, apparently believing, as I did myself, that the cage had actually reached the bottom of the shaft, called out : “ Get in—get in ! ” In I rushed, under the cage. There were loud cries of alarm. A brave fellow, John Stott, no doubt at imminent risk to his own life, pulled me out of my perilous position by sheer force. Just in time. A moment later the heavy iron cage crashed into the place where I had been standing. Its ponderous weight would have crushed me into a jelly. In the eighteen years of my subsequent mining life I had many a hairbreadth escape, but I was never so thoroughly within the very jaws of death as on that occasion.

CHAPTER V

FIGHTING FOR PEACE

Another Removal—Running Waters—A Coveted Position—Pit-boy Bullies—The Battle that never came Off—On the War-path—Quarrelsome Pit-boys—An Adventure with Oxen—A Lesson in Civility—Early Scars—A Strike for Honest Measurement of Coals—Agitation in the Coalfield.

SOME TIME IN 1848—in the spring of that year, I think it must have been—we removed from Haswell to Running Waters. We lived there for the next two years, that being more than our average stay at one place. While there my father and I worked at the Sherburn House pit. Running Waters was the fresh, poetic, Hiawathan name assigned to a few straggling farm-houses and cottages located some four miles from Durham, on the roadside between that city and Thornley Colliery. The surrounding country was rather bare and colourless, though the limestone hills and the sparkling, dancing brooklets, which ran hither and thither through the fields, gave a beauty and character to the place, and partly justified the name with which Nature herself had baptised it. In my leisure—that is, when the pit happened to be idle, for other leisure I had none—I spent many a gladsome hour in solitary rambles over the hills and moors and by the side of the running streams. Companion I had none, nor did I seem to feel this a serious deprivation. My brother Peter, to whom I was ever warmly attached, was nearly five years my junior, and, in early

THOMAS BURT

boyhood, such a disparity of years acts as an effective barrier to genuine comradeship.

Two of our neighbours, William, or Bill, Agar and Thomas Ormston, nicknamed "Tommy," had boys; but those of them who were at work were older and bigger than I, and between them and me there were divergences of temperament and tastes which kept us apart. In my merrier and more frolicsome moods, indeed, I ran races with them, and took part in mimic steeplechases through the fields and over the hedges. In running and leaping feats I soon became quite expert, and this won me some reputation with the Agar lads, with whom it was of consequence for me to stand well.

Ormston had only one boy at work. Of the Agars there were several brothers: strong, rude, unsophisticated pagans they were. None of them had ever been inside a school-house, nor, I should think, within a church or chapel, even for baptismal purposes. They were utterly illiterate, from father and mother downwards. They regarded me as a sort of prodigy because I could read, write, and cypher.

Running Waters was about two miles from the pit, and as a rule I had the company rather than the companionship of the Agars and of Jonathan Ormston to and from my work. The Agar brothers disagreed very much among themselves. They argued, scolded, swore at each other all the way as we walked to the pit, occasionally coming to blows. They had enough brotherly love, however, to induce them always to unite their forces against outsiders.

I have so fully detailed my early days in Haswell pit that I need enter into no elaborate description of my underground experiences at Sherburn House. This colliery belonged to the Earl of Durham. At the time of which I write, it gave employment to some two hundred

FIGHTING FOR PEACE

men and boys. Taking it altogether, my work while there was easy and thoroughly agreeable. I was never, as I had been at Haswell, employed near the face of the workings. Sometimes I was engaged near the shaft bottom, sometimes on the rolley-way as a horse-driver. After I had been a driver for a short time I was transferred—I may say promoted—to the superintendence of an inclined plane. My business was to hang on and detach the rope from a set of tubs, and to signal to the brakesman at the top of the incline when ready for a start. It was my duty, further, to keep a record of the number of tubs that came out of the workings. My pay, which as a driver had been 1s. 2d. or 1s. 3d., was now advanced to 1s. 6d. per day. Owing to the higher pay and the responsibility of the work the position I had now reached was rather a coveted one. I remember there were some murmurs among my comrades that I should so quickly have been promoted to a favourite place. The answer of the overman was that none of those who had a stronger claim by length of service could keep accounts properly. Thus early in my career my scholarship, scant though it was, gave me easier work, with its not unusual concomitant, higher pay, than I should otherwise have obtained.

My underground work, as I have said, was, on the whole, easy and pleasant. In some other respects things went less smoothly. My fellow work-boys were very rude and quarrelsome. I have somewhere read as a fact in natural history that, when a strange buffalo enters the field, his first business is to ascertain precisely what is his relative position to the rest of the herd. That is settled by a fight. If he is beaten, and has sense enough to accept his defeat, he is left ever afterwards unmolested. How buffalo precedence is decided I know not, but among the young buffaloes of Running Waters and Sherburn

THOMAS BURT

House pit the plan sketched was in great favour. I went among them a strange, raw boy of about eleven years of age. Though fairly strong and active, I was by training and disposition but ill-fitted for the rough-and-tumble life into which I was thrown. As I have said, I was shy, sensitive, though not without spirit, or destitute even of a touch of devilry. The latter quality, however, belonged to the reserves, and could be called out only in cases of extreme emergency. My parents thought fighting was very wicked, and strictly prohibited it. Once or twice, in my schoolboy days, when I had violated their command, I had been soundly whipped by my father—almost the only occasions when he had chastised me. In truth, I had no overpowering desire to fight; but I soon found that I must either fight or be subjected to all kinds of insults and ill-usage.

My difficulties began in the mornings on my way to work. Starting about four o'clock, we went together, a party of five or six—the Agars, Ormston, myself, and one or two others. The Agars so often quarrelled among themselves that they seldom needed other combatants. They were, as I have said, a rough lot. They were not altogether unkind, and, although they domineered over and bullied me not a little, none of them ever laid violent hands upon me. My great persecutor and tormentor was Ormston, who, though a year or two my senior, was near my own size. At first he confined himself to verbal abuse, heaping all sorts of jibes and opprobrious words upon me. He seemed to be trying how far he could safely go. His insults I received in silence or by soft answers, a very paragon of Christian meekness. This did not turn away his wrath. Then he challenged me to fight, still with the same result. The Agars at first remonstrated with Ormston, but before long they encouraged him. Day after day, for a considerable time,

FIGHTING FOR PEACE

this went on, till at length, taking courage, no doubt, from my passiveness, one morning young Ormston pushed violently against me as I walked in front of him, quickly following this up by a smart blow with his fist on my back—all this to the accompaniment of a volley of oaths and abusive epithets. This was rather too much for me. After all, I lacked not “gall to make oppression bitter.” My blood was up. Suddenly wheeling round, I threw down my “bait poke,” jacket, and other impediments to free action, and, facing Ormston in pugilistic attitude, I told him I was ready for him.

Ormston was startled. Clearly the little rascal, after all, did not want to fight. For a moment he stood dumb. Then he made excuses: “There was not time. We should be too late for work if we stopped to fight. But, if I would wait till night, I should have enough of it.” This shirking of an encounter which he had professed to desire so eagerly subjected him to the merciless sarcasms of the Agars. They now warmly supported me, and demanded that the duel should come off at once. Ormston persistently refusing, it was ultimately decided that the hostile meeting should be postponed till the day’s work was over.

At night the pit-lads collected in large numbers by the roadside near the pit to witness this great battle. It never came off. Ormston doggedly refused to fight. The crowd of youngsters, disappointed of their expected exhibition, hooted and jeered at Ormston’s cowardice. This humiliation on his part ought to have been enough for me; but, to my shame be it said, it was not. Had I struck him, even at unawares, in hot blood in the morning, I should have been justified, for I had received great provocation; but now, when he refused to fight, I might well have left his punishment to the jeers and ridicule of his companions. I struck him two or three blows

THOMAS BURT

with as much force as I could command. He neither attempted to defend himself nor to retaliate upon me, and ever afterwards Jonathon Ormston and I were good friends. He would bully and bluster in my defence, and I verily believe he would have fought for me had fighting been in his line. This exhibition of spirit won me great favour with the Agars. Many of the other boys in the pit had domineered over and bullied me, though none of them had behaved as badly as Ormston. Now, fairly on the war-path, I had other scores to settle.

For the next few months I had many a stout fisty battle, none quite so easy and bloodless as that just described. I have laughed at these juvenile pranks, but they were grim and terrible enough at the time. The Sherburn lads fought, of course, with their bare fists, knowing nothing of the Marquis of Queensberry's rules. There was, I dare say, very little "science" displayed by anybody. Certainly I had none. My one qualification was a certain tenacity of purpose, amounting to obstinacy, which made it impossible for me to yield until I was absolutely beaten. That attribute has done much for me through life, though it has not been an unmixed blessing, since it has caused me to waste many precious hours on things that were unattainable or not worth attaining. But this doggedness of character now stood me well. So far as I remember, I was only once defeated, and on that occasion I was rightly served, since I was then the aggressor. I had challenged a boy named Tom Turnbull. He was older and bigger than I. Tom, as I have good cause to remember, had a stiff arm, the force and value of which as a weapon of offence and defence I greatly miscalculated. I thought its want of flexibility would be a great advantage to me. Alas! the advantage was wholly on the other side. Tom wielded his arm like

FIGHTING FOR PEACE

a windmill. His blows were terrific. I began to suspect that he had an iron poker hidden up his sleeve. Clearly, I was over-matched. Conscience, too, had made a coward of me. I was in the wrong, not having the triple armour that a just cause gives ; so I quickly retired from the fray, a sadder and a wiser boy.

These pugilistic exploits discredited me at home, and brought me into serious conflict with my parents. They had striven to give me a sound moral and religious training. The noble art of self-defence was no part of my curriculum. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, sir." That was sometimes quoted to me as the answer, clever and sufficient, which had been given by a champion boxer to a swaggering bully who had saucily asked him to state the chief rule in the art of self-defence. A capital rule, which I tried to practise. But my good father seemed to have forgotten that the boxing moralist who uttered that fine maxim had certain other accomplishments in reserve when his first line of defence failed him. As for me, I was absolutely forbidden to fight, not only because fighting was vulgar and cruel, but because it was sinful. My father, it is true, seldom went beyond verbal reproof when he heard of my boyish contests. Once or twice, indeed, he thrashed me soundly without inquiring too particularly whether I was the aggressor or the aggrieved. To have fought at all was offence enough, and he must have begun to suspect, when rumours of battles came thick and fast upon him, that my bellicose propensities were rapidly degenerating into a bad habit. After one of these home whippings I startled my father by a strongly worded protest. "This is too bad !" I cried. "Whatever I do, I am sure to be punished. If I refuse to fight, the lads thump me. If I fight and win, I am thrashed at home. If I fight and lose, I am beaten twice. I'll go on fighting until I can get peace." This was the

THOMAS BURT

purport of my remonstrance, and it was not wholly without effect.

I had now fully resolved that henceforth I would take my defence into my own hands. My fighting days, which had been few and evil, began and ended at Sherburn. Never again was I among lads so quarrelsome; and though I was afterwards, as a youth, occasionally threatened and imposed upon, I have always stopped the aggressor in time by showing a readiness to defend myself on adequate provocation. I thought then, and I think now, that my parents—kind, indulgent, good as they were—made a great mistake in not permitting me to protect myself in my own way. They were visionaries: they had anticipated and ante-dated the millennium. I am inclined to think that when boys are dealing with boys, and where the civil ruler, the magistrate, and the policeman are not available, it is best, as a general principle, to allow them to settle their differences in their own way.

I had yet another encounter, the most formidable of all, before I bade farewell to Running Waters. A bullock attacked me. On Sundays we often attended the Primitive Methodist Chapel at Sherburn Hill. It was a pleasant walk of about two miles through the fields. We started as usual one morning, my brother Peter, then about seven years old, and I, taking the lead, my father and mother following some time after. On our way we had to cross a field in which several oxen were grazing. Peter, who went that way to school daily, was afraid of the oxen, and told me that one of them had sometimes run after him. Boy-like, I ridiculed his fears. One of the oxen was standing near a hawthorn hedge, and, as I wanted to pass the animal, I very foolishly walked between it and the hedge instead of going behind. Peter, wiser than I, warned me, saying this was the very bull, as he called it, which had been

FIGHTING FOR PEACE

after him. I passed on, taking no heed. No sooner was I fairly in front of the bullock than he suddenly made a rush at me, pushing me into the hedge-side. Then he rolled me across the field, pausing now and then as if to carefully inspect me with his large, meditative eyes. I was utterly helpless. The animal did not appear to be at all fierce or furious. His movements were rather leisurely. So long as I remained motionless he did not seem inclined to disturb me, but whenever I attempted to rise he gave me another push and another turn over. All the time I was fully sensible to everything that was going on. I thought my end had come, and a strange death it seemed to me. Once I kicked the beast smartly on the head. He gave me another turn over by way of retort, but otherwise he took little notice of the blow. When I discovered that he would not allow me to get upon my feet, I accepted the situation, and lay quietly down beside him. Presently another ox, a large white one, appeared. My heart sank within me. I was already overmatched, and to see reinforcements coming plunged me into despair.

I never dreamed that the newcomer might possibly be a friend and supporter. Whether idle curiosity or some nobler sentiment had brought him I cannot tell, but he certainly took no active part against me. In my boyish fancy at the time I confidently believed that the big white ox came along to chide my tormentor for his cowardice in tackling a poor creature so greatly his inferior in size and strength as I was. Whether any communication passed between them or not, one thing is certain: my powerful antagonist soon left off his tossings and rollings. When next I attempted to rise, he offered no opposition. My cap lay forty or fifty yards away, at the spot where the animal first attacked me. Picking it up, I ran as quickly as I could homewards.

THOMAS BURT

All this, which seemed an age, must have been the work of a few minutes, occupying less time than I have taken to tell it. I ran with all the speed I could command, knowing well how anxious my parents would be about my safety. Far away in the distance I heard Peter crying lustily, calling between his sobs: "Father, come on—come on! There's a bull has Tom down!" I ran after him shouting: "No, it hasn't. I'm all right now." I met my father running towards me at full speed, armed with a wooden rail which he had plucked from a fence. He was hastening to my rescue.

There was no chapel-going that day. Great was the joy to see me alive and well. The bullock had simply wished to teach me a much-needed lesson in good manners. I should not have passed in front of him. He must, I think, have been joking or poking fun at me in his own grim, disagreeable way. Had he been severely in earnest and viciously disposed he would not have left me with a whole skin and unbroken bones. As it was, save for a few black and blue spots here and there on my limbs and body, I had escaped unhurt.

Next day I was at my work as usual, but it was long before the soreness wore off, and I never quite forgot the lesson in deportment and in etiquette which had been so forcibly impressed upon me by my rude, untutored mentor. I learnt then, too, a most salutary rule of the road—a rule good for sea and for land, applicable alike to cars, to cycles, and to bullocks, viz., to keep well in the rear of the vessels or animals you want to pass, and never to cross their bows at right angles. Possibly the voyage may not end so soon, but safety will assuredly be promoted, and the risk of awkward collisions will be diminished.

Though I escaped from these encounters with boys and with beasts unharmed, or without serious harm, I

FIGHTING FOR PEACE

was not permitted to leave Sherburn altogether unscathed. I received while there a scar or two which I shall carry to my grave. First a tub, or rolley—fortunately an empty one—ran over one of my legs. From this hurt I quickly recovered. Then a more serious accident befell me: one of my feet was scalded rather severely. The enginemen, or firemen, at the pit had been unplugging the boilers, as I think it is called. In the darkness and thick mist arising from the steam I missed my way and stepped into the boiling water. My foot was in it only a moment, but it was long enough. I took little notice of it at the time. My day's work was over, and I imprudently waited for my comrades instead of going home as quickly as I could. I walked all the way from the pit to Running Waters without examining my foot. When at length my stocking was pulled off, part of the skin came along with it. This injury laid me idle for a few weeks. The wound did not heal quickly; proud flesh set in; caustics were applied, and for a few days I suffered great pain, the severest I ever remember having felt in my life.

But why dwell on these trivial details? They are common everyday occurrences, the wounds and bruises which come at one time or another to all men, or to all pitmen, who are engaged on the great battlefield of human life. My days at Running Waters, taking them all in all, were pleasant and joyous. Ere long I was to face hardships of a sterner kind elsewhere.

There were "labour troubles"—if I may use a convenient though rather a clumsy phrase—while we were at Sherburn Colliery. These troubles culminated in a short strike. The controversy bore, I remember, mainly upon the mode of paying for the hewer's work. This was long before compulsory payment by weight. At Sherburn House pit the coal was measured—nominally measured,

THOMAS BURT

though in reality the quantity was determined by the "keeper" or overlooker, who, by rule of thumb or guess-work, could "lay out" or confiscate the tub whenever he liked. There was great dissatisfaction on account of the number of tubs confiscated for alleged short weight. The miners demanded payment by weight and the right to appoint a check-weigher to see that justice was done. Without much difficulty or demur, the manager agreed to substitute weighing for measurement; but the real contest centred in the choice of the checkweighman, or miners' representative. The miners selected Thomas Pratt, an able leader who had championed the men's cause in the strike of 1844 and at other times. To this selection the owners or managers of the colliery were strongly opposed. Ultimately the men won, and Mr. Pratt was duly appointed.

Meetings of the miners were frequent during this disturbed period, and I used to plead with my father to allow me to accompany him to these gatherings. The speeches—especially those delivered by Mr. Pratt, by my father, and by his brother, Thomas Burt—deeply interested me. Of the topics discussed and of the sides taken by the speakers I have no distinct recollection, but I well remember that there were at times great differences of opinion, that the debates were often very heated, and that there was more or less suspicion among the miners lest unauthorized and unfriendly outsiders, in the shape of spies and talebearers, should hear what was going on and should tell it to the colliery officials. There were no miners' halls or other sheltered meeting-places available, so that the gatherings were always held in the open air. At one of these meetings I was greatly pleased to hear a rough-looking young fellow on the outskirts of the crowd remark to some of his comrades: "Let's go nearer; Tommy Burt's speaking. Aw always like to hear the Burts, 'cause we're sure to get sense fra' them."

FIGHTING FOR PEACE

The verdict was just, and I felt pleased to bear a name that gave me a share in the compliment. These incidents, though trivial in themselves, are perhaps worth recording. They illustrate the industrial battles or skirmishes of seventy odd years ago. They show, too, the conditions under which these battles were fought, and they indicate the progress that has since been made—progress not only in actual achievement, but still more perhaps in the spirit and temper in which our conflicts are carried on.

CHAPTER VI

EARLY INFLUENCES

A Time of Misery—The Trials of "Pony-Putting"—Objurgatory Language—A Father's Sad Reproof—A Life of Sleeping and Working—Wagon-way Experiences—Pay Saturdays and Seaside Strolls—Itinerant Preachers—A Humorist against His Will—Two Sunday-School Superintendents—A Chapel Incident.

BIRDS OF PASSAGE as we were, our flitting-time had once more come round. Our next halting-place was at South Hetton, where we sojourned for about a year. My father and I now worked at Murton, or Dalton (usually called "Datton") Colliery, about two miles away. Here I spent some of the most miserable days of my life. My vocation at Murton was pony-putting. The hours were long—not less than fourteen or fifteen a day, from leaving home in the morning to returning thither at night. The work was hard and dangerous, and, as it was new to me, my troubles were great and manifold. The novelty would have worn off, and I should soon, no doubt, have become expert at my business, but the strain imposed upon me was far beyond my strength. Pony-putting was supposed to be easy work—mere child's-play—and, indeed, in comparison with the hand-putting which preceded it, the work was not laborious, since the pony did the heaviest part of the pulling. But the tubs were clumsy and ponderous, the gradients in some parts of the workings were steep, and the empty tubs sometimes had to be

EARLY INFLUENCES

pushed a considerable distance by the putter himself. Then the tubs often got off the rails, and it was the putter's business to lift them on again as best he could. All this demanded no small degree of energy and dexterity.

My father, ever considerate and tender, had striven when seeking employment, to get me work of a nature more strictly within the compass of my powers. He argued with the manager, Mr. Bryden, who was known to him, that I was too young for pony-putting. Mr. Bryden asked, not unreasonably, to see me. When I accompanied my father to the colliery office, Mr. Bryden called out at once: "Burt, you must be mistaken in that boy's age; he looks more like sixteen than thirteen. He's big enough for pony-driving, and to that work he must go." Putter-lads were greatly needed at Murton then, and that was the determining factor to which all arguments had to yield. I was in my thirteenth year. As a rule the putters' ages ranged from fifteen to sixteen and upwards. To judge by what everybody said, I was in truth a big lad for my age. I was strong, too, for a sudden lift or a short spell of work; but I was not at all hard or wiry, and I lacked staying-power. This precocity might have its advantages, such as giving me a higher wage, a consideration for which I cared much more than did my parents; but it had the drawback of always throwing upon me tasks which were far beyond my strength. I suffered severely at the time, and, possibly, consequences followed which affected me in after years. Those weary loads, under which I was called upon to sweat and groan in my boyhood, not improbably tended to arrest my growth, and to render me for the rest of my life less healthy and vigorous than I should otherwise have been.

Pony-putting, as I have said, was dangerous as well as laborious. The hard work happily came in spells,

THOMAS BURT

with intervals of rest between, but the danger was constant. In the part of the mine where I was placed the roof was bad. Props of timber had to be set all along the roadways so close to the tram-rails that there was barely space for the tubs to travel. The seam, too, was thin, and if the tubs were slightly overladen they struck at the top, bringing putter and pony to a standstill, with no small risk of displacing the timber and bringing the roof about their ears.

The putter for the most part rode on the limbers, sitting, or partly crouching, so as to occupy as little space as possible. If he allowed any part of his body to project too far that part was not unlikely to be lopped off without ceremony. Along the straight roadways the ponies trotted or galloped at considerable speed. In the beginning of my putting career my great difficulties were at the crossings and turnings. There were no switches or mechanical contrivances to direct the tub on the way it should go. The putter had to manage pony and tub at the same time. A trained expert could, by pressure upon the tub, dexterously guide it as he wished. But I was untrained and inexperienced. When the pony took the right way, as he usually did, and the tub took the wrong way, as it too often did, the poor unfortunate putter was jammed between the tub and the limbers. I had thus many a wound and bruise, and how I escaped without broken bones has often been a mystery and a marvel to me. To the pony who (I have not the heart to say "which") was a careful, wise little animal, I owe an eternal debt of gratitude.

My inexperience as a putter brought me occasionally into conflict with the hewers. The hewers' pay depended upon the quantity of coal they produced and sent to bank. I could not take their coal away fast enough, and, in their eagerness to push on the work, I naturally

EARLY INFLUENCES

became the object of their abuse. Yet on that score I cannot, in fairness, complain. When any of them called me hard names I was either silent or I replied civilly. They soon saw that I was willing and anxious to do my best, and most of them spoke encouraging words to me, and helped me all they could.

With my fellow-putters I got on very well at Dalton. I had no fights or rows of any kind. When we had stop-pages at the flat, waiting for the sets of empty tubs coming in-bye, I used to tell them stories, which amused and delighted them. Where I got my stories from I do not in the least know. I had then read but little, and scarcely anything in the realms of light literature. I suppose I must have heard these stories from somebody, and, possessing a good memory and certain gifts of imagination, I probably added to and embellished the originals so as to make them as telling as possible. The lads, I well remember, used to laugh a good deal at many of my sayings. At first I felt hurt, fancying that they were mocking at or picking fun out of me. I soon found that their laughter was genial and kindly, and was due to what they called my dry and funny way of putting things. But for these lubricants I could not have kept body or soul alive at Dalton.

As for my soul, I fear that, in the estimation of the best judges, it was in greater peril even than my body. I had, I am ashamed to say, contracted, and almost perfected, the vicious habit of swearing. Among the putters that habit was common, indeed almost universal. Their cursing vocabulary, it is true, was limited to a few strong words, but these were not allowed to become fusty for want of use. These hard-worked expletives did duty sometimes as nouns, sometimes as verbs, being fulminated through every conjugation of mood and tense, as the necessities of the case demanded. My difficulties were

THOMAS BURT

great, but my bad language was utterly inexcusable. I had been taught better, and I knew better. This, however, I may say, that swearing with me was no idle pastime; it was seriously meant to help the work forward. I was a late starter, but I soon won a bad pre-eminence among my fellows.

At Haswell I had listened to Short, Mackenzie, and other masters of the black art. At Running Waters and Sherburn I had heard the Agar brothers, Tommy Ormston's family, and others, cursing each other, everyone with his own special accent and flavour of oburgation. And now, in my times of tribulation, when pony and tub became unmanageable, I poured forth all I knew, supplementing the more commonplace oaths with Biblical phrases which I had culled from the long-suffering Job or from the psalmist David when, in their wrathful moments, they found it necessary to tell their friends or their foes what they thought of them. These outbursts of mine astonished the untravelled youths of Dalton, and made them feel how feeble and meagre was their own vocabulary of imprecations.

So far as I knew, my parents were entirely ignorant of my profanities. But they were soon to be enlightened. My father was to hear me for himself in my best, or worst, form.

The set brought to the flat by the drivers consisted of eight tubs. There were six putters, each of whom took one, thus leaving two tubs, which fell as a prize to those who first returned from the coal-face with a full tub. There was always a great race for these extra tubs, success depending partly upon the distance to be travelled, still more on the putter's dexterity and good-luck. Practice by this time had made me fairly expert, though my strength was still overtaxed. I took part in these competitions with occasional success.

EARLY INFLUENCES

I was racing thus on one occasion when my tub suddenly left the rails. Silently I lifted it on again without much difficulty and without great loss of time, though I felt that my chance of winning the race had diminished, if not entirely disappeared. Before I had gone many yards farther another mishap of the same kind occurred. This was too much for my equanimity. I poured forth a volley of the strongest, hottest oaths that I could muster, at the same time doing my best to lift the refractory tub once more on to the rails. This I had just accomplished when I saw an approaching light glimmering not far away. My father's working place was in that direction, and I thought the light might be his. Fortunately I had to go up a roadway which ran at right angles to that along which the traveller was coming. I took the turn nicely, and, whipping my pony into a gallop, I thought I had effected my escape. But lo ! on looking round I saw the light pursuing me. The light carrier was, indeed, none other than my father ! What would he think ? What would he say ? I knew well he would say what he thought, and I knew, too, how capable he was of giving effective expression to his thoughts and feelings. When roused, my father had great powers of indignant speech, requiring neither oaths nor vulgarity to give point and emphasis to his language. I knew he must feel pained and angry at the bad language he had heard from me. I gathered myself together, expecting a torrent of reproachful and minatory words. The reproof came, but not in the way I expected—not in hot, angry, passionate invective, but in language at once calm, measured, sad, sorrowful.

“Tom, was that thou that I heard swearing ?” my father began, with an accent of half-sceptical surprise in his tone, as if he could not believe his own ears. The question was wholly unnecessary. He paused, as if

THOMAS BURT

awaiting an answer, though he could hardly have expected one. "I'm sure," continued he, in tones of sympathy, "thou hast thy own difficulties, but if thou cannot do thy work without swearing, go thy ways home; I can still manage to keep thee, and I'll be very glad to do it." That was all my father said. Not an angry, unkind word escaped him. I was silent. What could I say? Had he scolded me, much as I loved and revered him, I should probably have retorted. The incident was never again mentioned, and though I always vividly remembered my father's kindly admonition, I did not at once give up the vicious habit of swearing. That was only finally abandoned when I brought under control, and conquered, those ebullitions of temper which give rise to all passionate and ungoverned words and actions.

So tired, listless, utterly used-up was I when I reached home at nights that after dinner I not infrequently threw myself, unwashed, upon the bare floor and fell fast asleep. It was with the utmost difficulty that my kind-hearted mother could rouse me that I might wash and go to bed. Often did I plead with her—of course, in vain—to be allowed to lie with my pit clothes on, that I might be ready for the "caller" when he came his rounds next morning. Indeed, save on Sundays and each alternate Saturday—the pay Saturday being a holiday or holyday, as dearly cherished, if not deemed as sacred, by the northern pitmen, as the Sunday itself—save on these days the whole of my time was swallowed up in work and sleep. The hours for sleep were few enough, so many being absorbed in work, in preparation for work, and in travelling between the pit and home.

South Hetton and Dalton were connected by a wagon-way, used entirely for mineral traffic, and on this we were permitted—a great boon—to ride to and from our work. There was a gradient from South Hetton down

EARLY INFLUENCES

which the wagons ran, sometimes at great speed. When there were empty wagons, as was usually the case, the ride to work was assured. The homeward ride depended upon our luck in catching a set of wagons ready to start. Sometimes we had to wait long, sometimes we walked, and if the engine chanced to overtake us on the road we jumped, or tried to jump, upon the running wagons. As a rule we rode in the empty wagons, though occasionally we were glad to get upon the full ones, making our seat or our bed as best we could upon the rough lumps of hard, "roundy" coal. There were, of course, no seats; that did not matter. There was no shelter; that sometimes was a greater inconvenience. The rain, snow, and hail, when they came, discomfited us; but these, when at their worst, were nothing to the pelting showers of red-hot hail, the sparks that were sometimes poured upon our heads by the labouring locomotive as it dragged its heavy load up the hill. On the way to the pit, the boys or young men braked their own wagons down the incline, and, as there was often inexperience, and nearly always recklessness, the journeys were not unattended with danger. Terrible accidents, indeed, sometimes happened. The worst of these occurred through men or boys, in their too great eagerness to get home quickly, jumping upon the wagons when they were in motion.

I once saw, within a few yards of me, a man rush to his doom in this way. He was running to catch a set of wagons, and in trying to leap upon them he slipped his foot, or missed his hold, and fell among the wheels. His legs were horribly mutilated, all but cut off above the knees. The melancholy, tragic scene—the first of the kind I had witnessed—deeply impressed me. The poor, brave fellow seemed perfectly conscious of all that was going on. He raised his head, cast a sad, woeful

THOMAS BURT

glance at his mangled limbs, then laid himself down again with an air of perfect resignation. The grim messenger had come for him in his grimmest shape, and he met him unblanched. So far as I heard, not a murmur escaped from him. He died before he reached home.

Everywhere, below ground and above, dangers stood thick. Great also were the rush and recklessness. Hence there were many accidents. Never had I seen so many crutches, so many empty jacket sleeves, so many wooden legs. The risk, the toilsomeness, the disagreeableness of the work made me wish to be elsewhere. My father's nomadic ways gave me hope that he would not stay long at Murton. I strove to give a fillip to his restlessness by suggesting that the climate was insalubrious, calling his attention to the maimed and wounded mortals—I can hardly say bipeds—by whom we were surrounded. Our own ups and downs in life had been such that I had no ambition to do the rest of my earthly pilgrimage with the assistance of a wooden leg. My father was not an unobservant man, and he doubtless had his own reflections. But he had many things to consider. The rolling stone had gathered but little moss, and moss, in the shape of hard cash, was indispensable to these repeated flittings. Our time for departure had not yet come, but it was not far off.

I shall not dwell farther on those dark days. Dark, gloomy though they were, gleams of sunshine broke now and then through the black clouds. I fared pleasantly, as I have said, with my comrades of the pit. My home-life was ever placid and serene—lighted up, warmed and cheered by the constant care and tenderness of a loving father and mother. Once a week came the Sunday; once a fortnight came the not less welcome Pay Saturday, which I must be allowed to honour with a capital. On Pay Saturdays, weather permitting, and it had to be

EARLY INFLUENCES

very bad if it did not permit, I took long walks into the country. The neighbourhood was not pretty, still less was it grand. It was flat, tame, colourless, black with coal-dust and smoke ; but the sea, with its varying moods, with its unvarying freshness and variety, with its suggestion of infinitude, was only a few miles off, and to its shores I often wended my way.

Sunday was fully occupied with attendance at the Primitive Methodist Chapel. My parents expected me, if they did not command me, to go to school once and to chapel twice every Sunday. This was no hardship, the services being in every way pleasant to me.

I was beginning to take an interest in the sermons. These were delivered mostly by local preachers, themselves working men, few of whom had had any advantages of training or possessed any special gifts of eloquence, but all of them earnest, God-fearing men, with a firm belief in the truth of the message they were called upon to deliver. Now and then came the travelling preacher. He, too, as a rule had sprung from the ranks of the workers, but he was generally a reader and a student, sometimes with an educational standard of a high order. Two or three of the travelling preachers who visited South Hetton were great favourites with my father, and that was a good beginning for them to win favour with me. Chief among these were the Reverends C. C. M'Kechie, Thomas Southron, and Henry Hebbbron. I afterwards became intimately acquainted with the two former, and felt great esteem and admiration for them, alike for their broad, generous, manly natures and for their knowledge and preaching powers, which were considerable.

Mr. Hebbbron, being stationed in the Sunderland circuit at the time, often preached at South Hetton. He was a big, stout man, gifted with much eloquence and

THOMAS BURT

a never-failing sense of humour. Mr. Hebbbron's humour had a great attraction for me, and I sometimes travelled to the neighbouring villages to hear him preach. But his funny way of putting things was a source of grief and trouble to him. Occasional laughter greeted his quaint sayings, and this gave mortal offence to the more grave and narrow-minded members of his flock. Mr. Hebbbron was beyond doubt a truly religious man, pious, devout, serious-minded; and this tendency to say funny things in the pulpit was a sort of thorn in the flesh which greatly discomforted him, as he more than once told my father. He strove to conquer it, or to keep it within due bounds, though I am glad to say with imperfect success. Mr. Hebbbron's humour was as kindly as it was uncontrollable; it bubbled up unawares from the depths of his large, genial nature. His sermons were sometimes very solemn, eloquent, and impressive. Once, I remember, when he was preaching, my father, who was not usually at all demonstrative, startled the congregation by a rather sharp, loud cry of "Hear, hear!" Exclamatory phrases from the worshippers were not uncommon in Methodist chapels, but the ordinary cry was "Hallelujah!" or "Bless the Lord!" To raise a secular cheer was unprecedented, and it startled both preacher and congregation. Mr. Hebbbron was evidently pleased by any sign of appreciation, and he adroitly intimated that my father's "Hear, hear!" really meant "Hallelujah!"

I enjoyed, and no doubt profited by, my attendance at Sunday-school. In comparison with the other boys, I was a good reader. My spelling, too, until it was somewhat vitiated many years afterwards by Pitman's phonography, was exceptionally good. As the place occupied in the class depended upon expertness in the art of spelling, my vanity was gratified by my being able nearly

86

EARLY INFLUENCES

always to take the topmost place. At the head of the Sunday-school were the superintendents, who did duty on alternate Sundays. The names of these gentlemen were Thomas Robinson and Henry Nicholson. Two men more entirely dissimilar I never knew. Thomas was a gentle, reserved, mild-mannered man, who ruled the school, not ineffectually, in his firm, undemonstrative way. He was a universal favourite. "Harry" was more boisterous and severe. He was a native of Tyneside, and had the Northumbrian burr in full flavour. In his youth he had been a rather wild, out-of-the-way character, addicted to drinking, gambling, and other vices. Methodism caught hold of him, and he was now quite a reformed character. To his work in the chapel and Sunday-school he was devotedly attached. He was a rough, unpolished gem—a kind-hearted, witty, impulsive man, whom it was not possible to keep within strictly conventional lines. Harry was precentor in the chapel choir as well as superintendent of the Sunday-school. Funnier precentor choir never had! When he failed to pitch the tune properly—and that often happened—he would look calmly up to the preacher and call out: "Let's hev hor ower agyen, hinney!" When the verse was read out again, the second attempt was usually, though not always, more successful.

Harry on one occasion, to which I was an ear-witness, came near getting into disgrace by an inopportune witticism. A very popular local preacher, Turnbull by name, was appointed to preach at South Hetton. Great were the expectations, Harry especially having looked forward with eagerness to the happy day. Mr. Turnbull, through illness or other cause, was unable to fulfil his engagement. As a substitute he sent a young man named Beaney. Harry's expressive face showed that his mood was not angelic. Everything went wrong with the

THOMAS BURT

service. The tunes could not be started at the proper pitch. In angry, peremptory tones Harry called for the lines of the hymn to be given out again. The preliminaries were got through with difficulty. Then came the sermon, which was a greater trial still. The preacher was young, unpractised in speech; he was addressing an unsympathetic, a disappointed, audience, many of whom had expected, and all of whom, no doubt, wished, to hear somebody else. In the concluding prayer the preacher was unfortunate enough to quote the passage of scripture which runs somewhat thus, "If I go away, I will come again," when Harry's overburdened soul found utterance by calling out in clear, strong tones, audible to the whole congregation: "Wey, lad, thoo dissent need to mind."

Our sojourn at South Hetton came to an end rather suddenly and unexpectedly. Owing to a change in the management of the collieries, the whole of the workmen received notice to leave the place, or as an alternative to accept a heavy reduction of wages. A strike seemed imminent; and my father, having had enough of strikes for a time, resolved to seek employment elsewhere.

CHAPTER VII

THE EXPERIENCES OF A PUTTER-BOY

Back to Northumberland—"Home"—Seven in One Room—At Cramlington Colliery—Working Hours in Northumberland—"Water-Leading"—"Dicky" Fynes—Blind Ponies and a One-Eyed Man—Dangers of the Mine—A Thrilling Escape—A Wise and Sturdy Pit Pony.

TO MY INTENSE DELIGHT, our next flight was northward—over the Wear, over the Tyne, to the county of Northumberland. On the whole we had not fared ill in the county of Durham. The native Durham miner is very like his Northumbrian brother, and there have always been the warmest and kindest relations between them. My father and mother always lived harmoniously with their neighbours, and wherever we went they formed many attached friendships. The pits had worked well; wages, though not high, had been regular. Our debts, the evil legacy of the great strike, had been cleared off; and the scanty domestic exchequer had been somewhat replenished. It met the demands upon it. There were no deficits, nor was there any great surplus. Still, we had left behind us in Northumberland all our nearest and dearest kinsfolk, and our stay in Durham—if stay it could be appropriately called—had been regarded all the time as a sort of exile. My mother always spoke of Northumberland as our home; and though she, sainted woman, was too wise, and cared too much for the welfare of her husband and family, to fret or repine, yet it was no secret

THOMAS BURT

that she yearned to dwell again with her own people. My father, my brother, and I shared these feelings. Great, therefore, was our joy at our homegoing. But home, in our vocabulary, had a rather spacious meaning. Happily it meant peace and love, but there was still a spice of vagrancy in it ; it did not carry with it the notion of a settled habitation or an abiding resting-place. In our flight northward we first alighted at New Hartley, whence four or five weeks later we took wing again, descending next time at Cramlington Colliery.

Hartley raises sad memories as the place where, eight or ten years afterwards, a terrible shaft accident occurred which buried in a living tomb more than two hundred men and boys. At the time of our advent thither Hartley was regarded as a very safe pit. The roof was good ; there was little or no gas ; the workings were well ventilated ; and altogether it was one of the pleasantest pits in which I ever worked. The hours of boys were short, running from eight to ten a day, as against the twelve or thirteen commonly prevailing elsewhere at the time. There was but one shift of hewers. There was hand-putting, that kind of work being performed, as at Haswell, by strong young men. The putters were hard worked, having to fill much of the coal into tubs besides doing their own special work. My business at Hartley was "helping-up" ; that is, assisting the putters by pushing at the tubs where the gradient was extra steep. I was quite equal to my task, and the change from Murton to Hartley was like a translation from a Pandemonium to a sort of earthly Paradise. My father, however, was less satisfactorily placed. His work was hard and his pay small. Hartley pit worked but ten days during the five weeks we were there ; and, though by an effort we might have adapted ourselves to the short work, the small pay would soon have starved us out of the place.

THE EXPERIENCES OF A PUTTER-BOY

My spare time, of which I had more than enough, was spent in roaming about the fields, mostly alone ; in walks to the seaside, or in fishing from the rocks and quays at Seaton Sluice, which was about two miles away. In my early boyhood and youth I was very fond of fishing. As yet I cared nothing for and knew little of books, which were to become the great hobby, the passion, of my future life.

Of Cramlington little need be said. Work was to be had there, but no house was obtainable. My cousin, John Robinson, a son of one of my mother's sisters, with generous hospitality gave us shelter under his roof. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson had, at that time, one or two children, so that altogether we were seven or eight persons—not much more than an average colliery family. My cousin's house had but one room, and, though we should have been glad of a little more space, we managed, with mutual cordiality and good-will, to get along very harmoniously. In the pit things were rather rough and irregular. Under the benign management of Mr. Edward Potter there was, indeed, great freedom of action ; and there was a total absence of the petty tyranny by officials which was too common at many places in those days. With my father, and with me, too, boy though I was, this counted for much.

But there was a laxity, a want of system and discipline, in the pit, which increased the risk from accidents and produced many other evils. Of this irregularity I will give but one instance. There was no recognized starting time or ending time for the day's work of the fore-shift men. The coal-hewers went into the pit and came out when they liked, and some of them apparently liked to go in at ten or eleven o'clock at night and to remain till about noon the next day. Their working hours were often twelve or more per day. These extremely long

THOMAS BURT

hours were, it is true, optional. I merely put the facts on record because it is often asserted that the double-shift system, as practised in Northumberland, necessitates short hours for the coal-getters. That system no doubt readily lends itself to, and suggests, short hours, but it does not necessarily impose them upon the hewers. It was not till twelve or fourteen years subsequent to the time of which I write that uniformity of working time for the hewers was fixed and enforced throughout the whole county by the present Miners' Union.

While at Cramlington I was employed first as a water-leader and afterwards as a pony-putter. Water-leading was nearly always slavish and disagreeable in the extreme. The water-leader generally had to work at night and alone, save for the company of his pony. From the beginning to the end of his shift he was saturated with water. His business was to bale the water into tubs and take it away, to prepare the working place for the hewer to start his day's work. It was while thus engaged in Cramlington pit that I made the acquaintance of the late Mr. Richard Fynes, a gentleman afterwards well known and highly esteemed by the Northumberland and Durham miners. Mr. Fynes was a coal-hewer, and his working place was very wet. I had failed to clear the whole of the water out and to make the place ready for him to start work. Though an exceptionally genial, good-natured man, he was naturally angry at being thus stopped from starting his day's work. As the fault, or misfortune, was mine, he chided me severely. What my reply was I know not, and indeed I had wholly forgotten the incident till Mr. Fynes himself reminded me of it many years afterwards. My answer, however, as he told me, made a deep impression upon him. What I do remember well is that he at once set to work to help me, and that ever afterwards, whether as water-leader or putter, whenever

THE EXPERIENCES OF A PUTTER-BOY

my tub got off the way, or other difficulties beset me, I always had a strong, willing friend and helper in Richard Fynes.

The pony-putting at Cramlington in some respects resembled that which I have so fully described at Murton Colliery. The pit was pleasanter than Murton; the roof was better; there was less explosive gas, and the work therefore was not so dangerous. I was stronger, too, and had gained some experience and practice, and was fitter for my task. Still, there was great rush, hurry, and recklessness at Cramlington, and accidents to life and limb were of rather frequent occurrence. Crutches and wooden legs, it is true, were less conspicuous than at Murton, but these appurtenances were not wholly unknown. The ponies had a roughish time of it, many of them having by accident, recklessness, or sheer cruelty lost an eye, and some few of them having lost both eyes. An illustration of this eyelessness, or scarcity of eyes, not without a touch of tragic humour in it, occurs to my memory connected with this period.

I chanced on my way "out-bye" one day to meet a rolley-way man named Bob Barrass, who was struggling with manifold difficulties arising from, or greatly aggravated by, lack of visual faculty. Bob, who was a jolly, boisterous, humorous sort of fellow, had unhappily lost an eye himself. At the time when I met him he was driving, or trying to drive, two blind ponies "in-bye" along the engine-plane. The road was bad, full of ugly holes, and it was studded at short intervals with little pulleys, upon which the rope of the engine-plane ran. The light was imperfect, if, indeed, light was of much avail to the travellers. Progress was slow and laborious. Barrass's temper was severely tried, and quite unequal to the strain. When I drew near to him I overheard him soliloquizing in this wise: "Noo, we're a few fine beggars

THOMAS BURT

to be sent on to the road together. Here's three of us, begod, with only one eye amang us!"

Great as the dangers were at Cramlington, my father and I were fortunate enough to leave the place unscathed and uninjured. I had, indeed, one or two hairbreadth escapes. Once the roof came tumbling down, a huge mass of rock, within a few feet of me, without the slightest warning. On another occasion an exciting and alarming incident, attended with some danger to me, and with much more to my pony, occurred. Our day's work had ended, and we were going out-bye. There was a rather lengthy engine-plane along which we had to travel. The hauling-engine, called the "dickey," was at the surface, and was situated about midway between the face of the workings and Cramlington High Pit, where the coal was taken to the surface. On both sides of the "dickey"—towards the place of the workings and towards the shaft—the seam dipped, and the tubs in some parts ran at considerable speed. There was no separate travelling road; there were no places of refuge, such as are now made imperative by Act of Parliament; and along the greater part of the road the channel was very narrow. Men and boys could, with the exercise of due care, get out of the way of the running sets of tubs, but for horses and ponies there was not sufficient space for shelter or security. When drivers or putters, with their horses, were travelling in- or out-bye during working hours, signals were given for the engine to stand until they had reached their destination. When I arrived at the "dickey" bank-top on this occasion I was told by the person in charge that all was right, and that I could proceed shaftwards. Pony and pony-driver being alike eager to get to his stable or his home, no time was wasted. We galloped along in confidence, when to my amazement and horror the engine started. At first I imagined that

THE EXPERIENCES OF A PUTTER-BOY

the motion was temporary, and that the engineman or the signalman would discover his mistake, and would stop the engine. This comforting illusion was soon dispelled. The little pulleys were whirling swiftly round, the rope was dancing along at full speed, and I knew that the tubs, at the end of the rope, were rushing towards me, and would be upon me in a few minutes. What could I do? There was no means of signalling. Almost instinctively I shouted at the top of my voice. Shouting was in vain. No one was within earshot. Once I thought of beating a retreat, racing for dear life, the pony and I against the swift-running engine. But I feared that we had advanced too far for that, and that, ere we could return to the "dickey" bank-top, the nearest place of refuge, we would be overtaken by the tubs and cut to pieces. It is possible that safety might have lain in that direction had I thought of it soon enough; but I was not at all sure that the pony, sagacious though he was, would have realized the danger, and would have run his swiftest on a return journey towards the workings and away from the ever-alluring stables. But there was no time for meditation. Action—prompt action—was demanded. Nearer and nearer came the tubs. I fancied I could already hear the whirl and clatter of the rumbling wheels. The part of the engine-plane that I had reached was narrow, barely affording refuge for myself. I saw at a glance that I might possibly save myself, but I saw with equal clearness that the unfortunate pony was doomed.

Reluctantly I abandoned him to his fate. To save myself, indeed, was by no means easy. I could only do so by climbing aloft upon a canch, or ledge of rock. This I accomplished just in time. All I could do for the pony was to show him as good a light as possible. I saw a set of tubs strike the poor animal and carry him on. Not

THOMAS BURT

a shadow of a doubt did I entertain that I had seen my pony alive for the last time. I listened intently, expecting every moment that the tubs would be thrown off the rails by his body. But no! on they went without apparent check or impediment. After the set had passed me, I travelled anxiously back over in search of the mangled remains of my pony. I walked what seemed to me to be a long distance ere I could see the slightest trace of him. At last I found him standing calmly in a large "sump," or reservoir for drainage, up to the belly in water. I could hardly believe my gladdened eyes. So far as I could observe, he was unperturbed and uninjured. I took him by the bridle and invited him on to dry land. He jumped out of the sump with alacrity. I mounted him, and he galloped out-by as if nothing had happened. How he escaped is a marvel and a mystery that I cannot explain.

At Sherburn House pit, too, I had an adventure with my pony; and, as it illustrates how well these noble animals can take care of themselves in circumstances of great peril, I may here, though out of chronological order, briefly tell the story. The conditions were not dissimilar to those I have described. Again the pony and I were travelling out-by together, and again, by some misunderstanding or recklessness, the rolleys were set a-going while we were on the road. This time, instead of an engine-plane, it was a self-acting incline, where the weight of the full tubs pulled the empty ones up the bank. Fortunately, at this place the tubs ran part of the way very slowly, sometimes stopping altogether, and having to be helped forward by horse-power. There was space enough for me to get out of the way, but there was not room for the pony to do so without great risk. Jack—for that was the pony's name—was a strong, clever, tractable animal. He had been trained to push the tubs

THE EXPERIENCES OF A PUTTER-BOY

with his breast as well as to pull them in the ordinary way. He could push with almost as much force as he could pull. When the set started, I made up my mind at once what to do. I resolved to try to reach the approaching empty set of tubs at the point where they ran slowest, and to trust to Jack to stop them. This we accomplished. My part was mainly that of a spectator. Holding the candle for Jack, and putting in the applause at his prowess, I gave him a good light, and cried out encouragingly : “ Breast her, Jack !—breast her ! ” Jack perfectly understood. He set his breast resolutely against the advancing tubs. The struggle was severe. He was carried backwards several paces, but at last he brought the set to a standstill, and was nothing the worse for his adventure.

CHAPTER VIII

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

Still "Flitting"—Seaton Delaval—Archibald Forbes on Pitmen's Wives—The Author becomes a Coal-Hewer—"Alone, withouten any Company"—Two Miles Underground in the Dark—A Better Moral Atmosphere—The "Deputy"—Tom Mudd—Joe Young—A dangerous Job in a Risky Place—Eager to Hew—Ten Happy Years—Thomas Weatherburn—The Coal-Hewer's Earnings.

AFTER SOME TEN MONTHS' residence at Cramlington we removed to the neighbouring colliery of Seaton Delaval. That was in the winter of 1851-52, about the Christmas or New Year of that time. I had just completed my fifteenth year when I commenced work at Seaton Delaval, and I was twenty-three when I ceased work there. At last our storm-tossed barque was anchored. Here I grew from boyhood to manhood; here I toiled and moiled for eight long years. I read and studied men and books, weaving meanwhile the web of life, "a very mingled yarn, good and ill together," good, happily, greatly preponderating. Taking them all in all, they were happy, joyous, and not wholly unprofitable years. It must not be imagined, however, that we lived in one house all the time we were at Seaton Delaval. We were in three houses for certain, if not in four. But this was not due to sheer restlessness, or to love of change on our part. The system then and now in operation both in Durham and Northumberland was, and is, for the colliery proprietors to provide houses for the workmen. The house is regarded as part of the workman's wage, and is

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

to be vacated when his term of service expires. Obviously, this system has its advantages and its disadvantages, the pros and cons of which I cannot now discuss. There was no colliery house available for us when we first went to Delaval, so we rented a house at Seaton Terrace, about a mile from the pit. Thence, after a few months, we successively removed to the South Row, then to Forman's Row, where we settled for the greater part of our stay at Seaton Delaval.

Seaton Delaval was then regarded as a sort of model colliery village, and such in some respects it was. Here, indeed, as at other colliery places, the cottages were all of one uniform pattern, undiversified and unbeautified by any architectural character or adornment. They were, for the most part, substantially built of stone, and were ranged in long single rows. Outside there was ample scope and verge enough. Unlike many other colliery villages, the rows at Seaton Delaval were never crowded together. In front, or behind, each cottage had its little garden, and all round were the open country and the green fields. The sanitary arrangements were fairly good, and the place was healthy. Forman's Row was the longest of the rows, having some hundred and twenty houses. The outside framework, therefore, was large, breezy, wholesome, affording ample breathing-space and elbow-room.

Inside, the arrangements were less spacious and less satisfactory. In comparison with neighbouring collieries at the time the houses at Seaton Delaval were good; but, though relatively good, they were far from ideal. Those in the double row had two rooms on the floor and bedrooms above. In the other rows nearly all the houses were single, consisting of one good-sized room and a pantry on the ground floor, with a garret overhead. The garret was unceiled and without a fireplace. It had

THOMAS BURT

a little window of four small panes, suggestive of the time when the very sunlight was a taxable commodity. It was in a house of this type that we lived, thrived, and were happy from about 1854 to 1860.

Nothing so much astonishes the observing visitor who comes fresh to the colliery districts of the north as the order and cleanliness, the tidiness and taste, with which the pitmen's wives, under very adverse circumstances, manage their housekeeping. Some years ago the late Mr. Archibald Forbes, the distinguished war-correspondent, came, as a representative of the *Daily News*, to see and describe the houses and the home-life of the northern pitmen. The late Mr. Joseph Cowen introduced Mr. Forbes to me as one who could assist him in his inquiries. As Mr. Forbes's time was limited, I accompanied him to two typical collieries, fairly representative of the old and the new, of the worst and the best of our colliery villages. Mr. Forbes saw much that interested him; but what amazed him most, and what he said he should never forget, was the skill and industry with which the pitmen's wives managed their housekeeping, and, above all, he was struck with the courage and cheerfulness with which they strove, without fuss or complaint, to make the best of everything. My friend Miss Dorothy Tennant, afterwards Lady Stanley, travelling over much the same ground a few years later, and bringing with her the eyes of an artist and a woman of taste, was impressed in the same way, and gave expression to similar sentiments. At Seaton Delaval the good dames seemed to have entered into a wholesome rivalry as to who should have the best-furnished and the best-managed house. From top to bottom of the long Forman's Row every cottage bore unmistakable evidence, external and internal, of the care, the industry, and the taste of the queen who ruled within. When it is remembered that

100

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

there was but one room, which had to do duty as kitchen, bedroom, scullery, and parlour, the marvel is that there was either the desire or the ability to evoke order and beauty out of such unpromising material.

For the first few months in Seaton Delaval pit I had no fixed occupation. I was put to odd jobs, sometimes to casting small coal, sometimes to clearing away rubbish so as to prepare the working-places for the hewers, and sometimes to water-leading. Afterwards, from my sixteenth to my eighteenth year, I was mainly engaged in pony-putting. Between seventeen and eighteen I worked as a putter and hewer, doing sometimes the one, sometimes the other, as occasion required. When I reached eighteen, or about that age, I settled down to coal-hewing, and this continued to be my vocation for the next ten years of my life.

My water-leading days, or nights, at Seaton Delaval, though they extended over many months, were not specially eventful, and may be dismissed in a few words. The first job of the kind to which I was put was water-baling, rather than water-leading, as it was incorrectly called. I baled the water into wooden boxes, or spouts, which conveyed it into a large sump, whence it was pumped by a "crank," so named. The crank was a sort of gin or windlass, worked by a pony which was driven round and round a circle by an old man. There was a great quantity of water, and the pump had to be kept going night and day by relays of men and ponies. My work here was at first very hard, dull, and solitary. Nearly all the time I was in the night-shift, and quite alone. The old crank-driver was my only neighbour, and from one week-end to another I scarcely ever saw his face. My first shift, I remember, was on a Sunday night. When I saw the quantity of water I had to lift, so as to enable the hewers to get into the coal-face early next morning,

THOMAS BURT

I was almost appalled. By dint of strenuous application, however, I successfully accomplished my task. Sunday night was always the most difficult and laborious, since then I had to deal not only with the water springing from the strata, but with that which had been allowed to accumulate for several hours before.

The life, as I have said, was rather lonely. The crank was a few hundred yards away, even in a direct line, and to reach it a somewhat long detour had to be made. On the direct line a brattice stopping, for ventilating purposes, had been erected, and to the stopping the man occasionally came to speak to me, usually by way of fault-finding, scolding, and reprimand. These little rows came as a double blessing. They relieved the old man's feelings, and they brought a greatly-needed touch of variety into my otherwise somewhat dull, monotonous life. The reader may wonder how I came to incur the old man's wrath, and what on earth the crank-driver had to do with the baler of water. The connection was closer than it may seem. If I failed to keep the "strum" clear of rubbish (the "strum" being the perforated end of the pipe into which the water was pumped), or if I omitted to warn the driver when the water in the sump was exhausted, and he thus drew air instead of water into the pipes, in both these cases a great deal of additional work was thrown upon the old man and his pony. Accordingly, upon my devoted head curses loud and deep were poured without stint, without measure, but perhaps not wholly without justification or provocation.

My time had now come for transference to another job, water-leading in reality as well as in name. I had to deal with a large accumulation of water in some old workings which had long been disused, and which, in pit phraseology, were drowned out. My new sphere of operations was far from the shafts—two miles or more.

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

Company there was none, except my pony. At the week-ends I was the only human being in that part of the workings. The splash of my water-scuttle, or the occasional falls of roof in the old workings, echoed and re-echoed through the empty galleries of the mine. The sounds were ghostly; the loneliness was oppressive; but I had no superstitious fears, and the inconveniences of isolation were practical rather than sentimental. When my tub got off the rails, and required more strength than was available to lift it on again, or, worse still, when I lost my light, I felt the full force of the text that it is not good for man to be alone. Lucifer matches were less common than they are now, and I am not sure that boys would have been permitted to take matches into the mine. Sometimes, as an extra precaution, I kept a spare candle burning, but this reckless prodigality could not go on always. Only once, so far as I remember, and it was hardly a thing to be easily forgotten, my light went out. I did not know the exact hour, as I had no watch, and I thought it just possible that I might catch the horse-keepers at the stables before they had finished their work. If this failed me, there was nothing for it but going to the shaft bottom, or even to the surface, before I could get a light. The stables were about half-way to the shaft. When I reached them the horse-keepers, alas! had departed. I had to travel, therefore, two miles or more in total darkness, much of the way along an engine-plane, over a very rugged road. Fortunately, I was a good walker in the dark, and I don't think it took me more time to go out-bye than it did to perform the return journey after I had obtained a light. Still the loss of time in travelling four miles was considerable.

From water-leading I was sent to pony-putting, and for the next two years that continued, in the main, to

THOMAS BURT

be my employment. At first, I found the work strange and difficult. My experience as a pony-putter at Murton and at Cramlington, indeed, helped me somewhat ; but the circumstances and the methods of work were so different at Seaton Delaval that I could not at once adapt myself to the new situation. At this place ponies were yoked in traces instead of limbers ; they often hauled two or three tubs instead of one. That was, in itself, a great advantage ; but the novelty did not fit in with my previous experience, and, for a time, I did not get on well as a putter. The mine, however, was pleasant. It was well ventilated. The seam, in the part where I worked, was nearly level ; there was scarcely any explosive gas, and the roof was good. The awkwardness of novelty soon wore off, and, as my strength was now fully equal to the demands made upon it, after a few weeks' practice I became an expert putter. That meant a great deal. It gave me a higher wage, putters being paid by the score, and, better still, it enabled me to get along harmoniously with the hewers. Instead of the grunt of disapproval with which I had sometimes been saluted when I first presented myself in the mornings, the hewers expressed hearty satisfaction that I was to be their putter for the day. Though I cared for a good wage, I cared much more to stand well with my fellows.

Everything now went smoothly. Seaton Delaval pit, taking it altogether, was the pleasantest in which I had ever worked. The moral atmosphere, too, was purer than I had breathed elsewhere in my underground life. There was less rush and hurry, less tearing and swearing, than I had known heretofore. Among the putters at this time there were a few young men connected with the Primitive Methodist Society, some of whom were commencing as local preachers, others being chapel-goers, all having more or less desire for mental improvement. They set

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

a standard of conduct and language the influence of which extended far beyond their own circle. In place of the frivolous, trivial, or, worse still, the foul and ribald conversation too often heard when the putter-lads gathered together, these youths discussed the merits of their favourite preachers, or they talked of the books they were reading. Paley's *Natural Theology*, Dr. Dick's works, and the Rev. William Cook's *Theology* were, I remember, among their popular books. Of these I myself knew little or nothing at the time, but I listened with interest to the conversation and discussions.

The putters had a great deal to do with the deputy-overmen, always called the "debitees," since, in the absence of the overman, the deputies had the general superintendence of the work. At Seaton Delaval some of the steadiest and best of the workmen were placed in this position of trust and foremanship. The deputy's business was chiefly to timber the working-places and to look after the safety of the men and lads. It was deemed no part of their mission, as I had too often found to be the case elsewhere, to push and bully the drivers and putters.

The machinery of the pit did not stop for meals, but it was usual, when the back-shift men came in-bye to relieve their "marrows," for twenty minutes or half an hour to be allowed for feeding operations. This was the ever-welcome "bait-time." The deputy was the time-keeper, and it was his duty to see that the bait-time was not unduly prolonged. Part of this interval was occupied by the deputy in "placing the work"—that is, in apportioning to each putter the particular hewers whose coal he had to "put" or take from the workings. The placing of the work, especially at a large "flat" where many hewers and putters were employed, was sometimes a rather intricate operation. The aim was to

THOMAS BURT

give all the hewers, as far as possible, an equal opportunity of getting their coal out. The distance of the "workings" from the "flat" varied: still more did the putters vary in strength and in expertness. Some "handicapping," to use a convenient sporting term, was therefore required. To adjust matters fairly, judgment and arithmetical skill were alike requisite on the part of the deputy. These were not always at hand. Sometimes two or three putters had to take the coal from one set of hewers or from one hewer; and, though our criminal code had been so far reformed that "drawing and quartering" had ceased to be a recognized part of our system of jurisprudence, it was no uncommon thing for a Delaval putter to be told by the deputy that he had to get half a man in one place and half of another man elsewhere.

Thomas Mood, invariably called "Tom Mudd," was deputy at a large flat where I was putter. Sam Bailey, of whom I shall have more to say later, was another of the putters. Tom was a man of varying moods, though as a rule he was kind-hearted and fair in his dealings. He was utterly illiterate, and knew nothing of the science and art of numbers. Tom's most trying ordeal was the placing of the work. He would rather have timbered the most rickety working-place, or drawn the most dangerous "jud." Knowing full well his weakness in arithmetic, he always tried to avoid this ordeal. "Noo, hinneys," he would cry good-naturedly, "ye've had a good bait-time; let's hev a start again. Ye'll get yer wark the syem as in the fore-shift." "Nay, Tom," Sam would waggishly suggest, "how can that be? We have four or five men more than we had in the fore-shift. We must have the work placed properly before we start. Here's a bit chalk. Figure it out on the blackboard." Tom was unwilling to acknowledge his incompetency to solve the problem. He

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

would puzzle and perspire for a few moments. When he had made his final statement, he always had a few half men left that he did not quite know what to do with. All the time we scamps had mentally arranged matters among ourselves, and, after we had worried poor Tom sufficiently, and gained a few minutes extra bait-time, we cheerfully resumed the work of the day.

Another deputy who was very interesting and amusing was Joe Young. Joe was a wholly different type from Tom. He was intelligent and well informed, and, though a kind, considerate man, he possessed a dry humour and a caustic wit which made him formidable as an opponent. It was often amusing to hear Joe placing the putters' work. He always knew his own mind, and could not be either bamboozled or shifted from a decision once taken. "Hoo is this, Joe, that thoo's not given me as many hewers as thoo's given to Billy Coulson and Tom Burt?" cried a putter-lad, whose eagerness for work was much in excess of his power of performance. Joe at first tried to evade the question, not wishing to say anything unkind, but his questioner persisted. "Wey, Jack, hinney," replied Joe, "thoo scratches the slideys." This answer, reminiscent of Joe's boyish days when, like Wordsworth's "cottage girl," he used "to run and slide," disposed of poor Jack, amid a hailstorm of laughter from his comrades.

Another of Joe's sayings occurs to me. Some years afterwards, when I had become a hewer, I was assisting Joe to draw my "jud." Drawing out the timber is usually very hard and extremely perilous work. In this particular case it was exceptionally dangerous. The entrance to the jud was quite insecure. We ran great risk of being buried amid the falling debris and still greater risk of having our one road of exit cut off. Joe was a careful, skilful worker, cool and brave too, but he made no attempt to disguise from himself or from me that we

THOMAS BURT

were engaged in a hazardous undertaking. He had, somewhat needlessly, warned and admonished me, telling me specially to keep my ears and eyes open as to any changes in the entrance to the jud. The prop-drawing—the real hard work—devolved on Joe, my business being to carry the timber, after it was drawn, to a place of safety. While Joe was alternately felling and cutting with all his might at an obstinate prop, I suddenly heard a rushing sound in the roadway. It turned out to be nothing alarming. Joe's son, who was a timber-leader, had simply come to consult his father about something. Whatever the boy's question was, it never received an answer. As soon as Joe heard his son's voice, he cried out: "George, is that thoo? Off thoo goes at once. One out of a house is quite plenty to be in here." Prompter, more dutiful, filial obedience I never witnessed. The creaking timber assisting George's filial piety, he took to his heels at full speed, and was not seen again that shift.

From pony-putting I went to coal-hewing before I was quite eighteen years of age. The demand for putters was much greater than the demand for hewers, so that the transition from the one job to the other was not without difficulty. There was an attempt at fair dealing by giving each putter his turn, priority depending mainly upon age. I was eager to hew. The work, indeed, was much harder, but the hours were shorter and the pay was higher. This latter consideration had become important. My father's health, which had always been precarious, had now fairly broken down, and he had been compelled to give up his pit work. My brother had commenced work underground, and was receiving a shilling, or perhaps fourteenpence, a day, so that the family income depended mainly upon my earnings.

Heretofore, my advancement in fortune, from trapper-

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

boy to putter, had been governed by my size and strength. Now a new element, age, was to be the determining factor. I was a strong lad for my age—stronger and bigger, probably, than I have ever been since. Certainly I could compete with my fellow-putters more successfully on the ground of strength and weight than on that of years. I therefore resented the age-test.

Before I take final leave of my pit-life as a boy, I may say another word about the working hours. Cobbett, writing from the city of Durham in the year 1832, says : “ Here is the most surprising thing—thousands of horses continually living underground ; children born there and who sometimes, it is said, seldom see the surface at all, though they live to a considerable age.” This statement is, of course, largely mythical, someone having grossly imposed upon the credulity of the sturdy Sussex yeoman. But, though children were not born in the mines—for there were no women there—and though they did not live underground continuously, the hours were exceedingly long. My own hours, as I have said, were on the average about thirteen a day from bank to bank. The hours were a matter of agreement between employers and workmen. By law there was no limit whatever to the working hours, nor was such limit imposed until 1872. More than once I have myself, as a boy, in cases of emergency, stopped double shift, or twenty-four hours at a stretch. The working-time for pit-boys is now seven hours a day from bank to bank.

I had now, so to speak, completed my apprenticeship. I had passed through all the common stages of pit-life, from trapper-boy to coal-hewer. So far as my work was concerned, I now ceased to be a boy, and henceforth was a man. As a coal-hewer there were yet ten more years of underground life before me. Roughly speaking, half of that time was to be spent at Seaton Delaval and the

THOMAS BURT

other half at Choppington Colliery. These were years of hard work and moderate pay. They were, on the whole, very pleasant years, some of the happiest of a not unhappy life. Incidents worth recording were few, and I need enter into no detailed history of this time. Before I fairly settled down to my new work as a coal-hewer at Delaval I worked a few weeks at Seghill, about two miles away. Delaval was working badly, and the manager allowed me to go to Seghill for a time.

At Seghill I worked with my uncle, Thomas Weatherburn. He was a strong, skilful hewer. For many years he had been an engine-man, and had been tempted, or starved, into the coal-mines that he might get higher pay. He worked with the steady stroke, the composure, and the effectiveness of a perfect machine. My uncle was one of the most even-tempered, one of the coolest, most self-possessed men I ever knew. Under the severest provocation I never heard him speak an angry or an unkind word. He went neither to chapel nor to church; hence some of his Methodist friends were greatly troubled about the perilous condition of his soul. They really had no need to concern themselves. A purer, healthier, altogether a serenener soul has seldom taken human form. What his creed was, or whether he had any, I know not, for on that subject he was silent, but his temper and his conduct had reached a standard of perfection seldom attained by man. By his courage, sagacity, and self-possession my uncle saved his own life and the lives of several other men and boys many years afterwards when a terrible explosion occurred at Seghill Colliery. Seven or eight men and boys were killed on that occasion. Many of the survivors were panic-stricken, and it was well known at the time that everybody in the pit would have perished by the fatal after-damp had not Weatherburn, in the face of enormous difficulties, gathered them

110

WORKING AT THE COAL-FACE

together and led them to a place of safety. Brave rescuers, who happily are never wanting on such occasions, reached them just in time, and all were saved. Though my uncle lived many years afterwards, he was never in physical vigour quite the man he had been.

The hewer is paid by the ton. His earnings, therefore, depend partly upon his industry, strength, and skill, and partly upon his luck. In extreme cases, I have known two or three shillings a day difference between one working-place and another. To give an equal chance to everybody, the places were "cavilled," or balloted for, once a quarter. A good "cavil" was, of course, a desideratum.

The hewers grouped themselves into parties of four, these "marrows" working together, two in each shift, and dividing the total earnings among them on the pay Friday, which came once a fortnight. The satisfaction and smoothness of the hewer's life depend in no small degree upon his having suitable "marrows." In this respect I could not have been better placed. At Seaton Delaval I worked all the time with my uncles, Robert and Andrew Burt, the other partner in the quartette being William, or Willie, Armstrong. My closest relations were with my uncle Robert, since he and I were always in the same shift, and for the most part in the same working-place. He was not a very strong man, but he was an exceptionally neat, skilful worker, and he often made more headway than men who were greatly his superior in strength.

Both my uncles, as I have said, were prominent members of the Primitive Methodist Connexion. They were just men, fully living up to their professions. Willie Armstrong was about my own age, perhaps a year or two older. He was steady and industrious, quiet, cheerful, and in every way agreeable as a fellow-worker.

THOMAS BURT

Willie made no profession of faith, or want of faith. A fairer, better marrow no one could desire or obtain.

The hours of hewers at Delaval then, 1855-60, were about eight from bank to bank. The wage would run about 5s. a day. That was then deemed a good wage, and I think it would be above the average of the county. Certainly the wage at Delaval was higher than at some neighbouring collieries. During the winter months work was irregular. Taking the year round, the pits would probably work about nine days a fortnight. The miner then nearly always had his house and coal free, a small sum of sixpence a fortnight being charged for the carting of the fuel. After making deductions for powder, candles, and working tools, and for irregularity of employment, the hewer's wage at this period would probably average, the year round, from 21s. to 23s. per week.

CHAPTER IX

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

Awakening of the Desire for Knowledge—Peter Burt's Library—The Author's Early Reading—Introduction to Great Literature—A Difficulty about Gibbon—The Poets—Wordsworth—Vigorous Self-Culture—Acquisition of Shorthand—The Love of Knowledge for its Own Sake—Companions of Early Manhood—The Author's Father

“**E**VERY MAN WHO rises above the common level,” says Gibbon, “has received two educations: the first from his teachers, the second, more personal and important, from himself.” My education, such as it was, has been mainly self-directed. Few men probably owe less to living teachers, and few certainly owe more to books, than I. My schooldays added together would barely total two years. I would be about seventeen when I realized how utterly ignorant I was and when I was seized with an eager desire for knowledge and mental improvement. For the next four or five years I read and studied with intense earnestness. Happily for me, my father was a lover of books, and for a working miner of that period he had a fairly good library. Certainly it was the wonder and envy of his brother local preachers and of others who from time to time came to our house. It was greatly to his credit that, with his scanty education and his narrow means, he had collected together so many good books. Yet, in truth, his books were few and insignificant enough. They greatly lacked variety, consisting almost entirely of sermons and theo-

THOMAS BURT

logical works. Filling a whole shelf of the little bookcase was a complete set of Albert Barnes's notes on the New Testament and the Book of Job. There were several volumes of the Congregational lectures, among them Hamilton on "Rewards and Punishments." *The Homilist* and *The Christian Witness* were there in several volumes, and, of course, the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* for many years, all neatly bound.

History, science, philosophy, were unrepresented. Light literature there was none: no fiction, no romance, no poetry, nothing tempting, attractive or appetizing for a beginner. My father was broad-minded and, on most subjects, singularly free from prejudice; yet he had a strong aversion to novels, to plays, and to everything that he deemed light or frivolous. Never in his life, I should think, did he enter a music-hall or a theatre. This strain of Puritanism, in his religious habit and training rather than in his character, partly accounted for the absence of fiction, but the lack of poetry was less easy of explanation. He had an ear and a soul for the music and melody of words, and he knew the difference between jingling doggerel and true poetry. His love of poetry, however, appeared to find satisfaction mainly in hymns and sacred songs—Charles Wesley, Watts, Toplady, and James Montgomery being his favourite hymn-writers.

Robinson Crusoe, the *Arabian Nights*, and other boys' books were unknown to my boyhood. This was an irreparable loss, for, though I read them afterwards, the man can never relish such books with the zest and simple faith of the boy. Until I had passed the age of seventeen I had read few books—none in our standard literature. Indeed, I had but little time, and no great inclination, for reading. I was underground over twelve hours a day, often out of the house from thirteen to fourteen, and my work was sometimes hard and exhausting.

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

When about fourteen years old a comrade lent me a few stray numbers of the *London Journal*, a highly-spiced periodical, which I read with great gusto. It was full of adventures, of wild, romantic stories depicting duels and battles, deeds of daring, hairbreadth escapes by land and sea, the heroes being banditti, pirates, robbers and outlaws. This stirred the blood and excited the youthful imagination. When my father caught me reading it he gently chided me for wasting time on such rubbishy stuff. Wretched garbage no doubt it was, yet, after all, perhaps the time given to it was not wholly wasted. No useful information, indeed, was gained, but I was acquiring facility in reading, and laying hold of the golden key which would open to me the rich treasures of a great literature.

Stranger than the blank in fiction and poetry was another omission : there was no *Pilgrim's Progress* in my father's little library. One of my aunts, living some two miles away, I discovered had a copy of Bunyan's immortal dream. The Bible and the *Pilgrim* were, I believe, the only books in my aunt's house. *Bunyan*, for some reason, probably because of the great esteem in which it was held, was hidden away in a drawer, and my aunt was disinclined to let me take the book away with me, but she gladly gave me permission to read it at her house. As my visits were few, I had to read it by snatches. Ultimately I read it all, some portions many times over, with intense delight, though I fear with no great spiritual profit. Not as a dream or allegory, but as solid literal history did it present itself to my boyish mind. I believed every word of it. Perhaps it was the only book I ever read with entire, unquestioning acceptance. When I had finished reading, my pious aunt, I remember, wishful to know how I had been impressed, was greatly shocked to find, on inquiry, that in the famous encounter between

THOMAS BURT

Appolyon and Christian I declared my sympathies to be wholly on the side of the evil one. Could there be proof more conclusive of the doctrine of innate human depravity?

There is one novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which I should not omit to mention, since it made a great sensation when it appeared, and it was the only book of its class brought home by my father. *Uncle Tom* was read aloud in our little family circle, and it gave us many hours of happy, thrilling, and not unwholesome excitement. That would be in the year 1852, when I was fifteen. About the same time I read *The White Slave* and the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. Thus began a keen, lasting interest in the anti-slavery agitation, which afterwards made me familiar with the names and labours of Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, Whittier, Emerson, and other fine spirits, poets, orators, philanthropists, who battled for freedom and righteousness on the other side of the Atlantic.

For stories, anecdotes, for something lively and telling, I ransacked my father's theological magazines, with but small success. Two books of his, however, I found greatly helpful, Todd's *Student's Manual* and an odd volume of Channing's works. The manual was a handy little book, full of useful hints and suggestions on reading, writing, and study. To its wise counsel I was much indebted. Still more hopeful and inspiring was Channing. That such an author should be in my father's possession in those days was in itself remarkable. Channing, indeed, was a pure, noble soul, devout and saintly; but, from the strictly orthodox standpoint of those days, he was an arch heretic. Surprise was therefore not infrequently expressed by my father's co-religionists that such a writer should be read and admired by a Methodist local preacher—surprise not always unmixed with criticism and grave admonition. That, be it remembered, was some seventy

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

years ago. In the interval we have travelled far. A broader, a more catholic spirit now prevails. Not a few of the heresies of that time are the accepted creeds and commonplaces of to-day, and Channing's works are now to be seen in many a Methodist household.

This volume of Channing, which so profited and delighted me, contained essays on Milton, Napoleon, and Fénelon. These I read with attention; more than once I read them—that on Milton many times over. The style took my fancy. Compared, indeed, with the great masters of English prose the critic would no doubt detect failings not a few in Channing. But I was not a critic; and the clear, easy, simple words, the rhythmic phrases, pleased my ear, while the sentiments—always pure, generous, lofty—impressed the heart and the understanding.

Introduced by Channing, the poet of *Paradise Lost*, the literary champion of the Commonwealth, became one of my earliest heroes. Though time often dwindles and dwarfs the heroes of our boyhood, Milton yet stands in my estimation as one of the most commanding and majestic figures in our history and literature.

Eagerly did I desire to know more of Milton, to read his prose and poetry for myself. With my scanty pocket-money, high-priced books were beyond my reach; but I was lucky enough, when hunting, as was my wont, among the second-hand bookstalls in Newcastle market-place, to light upon some odd volumes of Milton's prose works, which I bought for a few shillings. I read them all—politics, theology, travels, with touches of autobiography—nothing came amiss to my voracious appetite. Over and over again did I read the *Areopagitica*, "that sublime treatise" which, Macaulay tells us, "every statesman should wear as a sign upon his hand, and as frontlets between his eyes."

THOMAS BURT

Another great book which I bought in those days was Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Bohn's edition in seven volumes). Relative to my means, the price was rather stiff; but by getting one volume at a time, as I could afford to pay for it, this difficulty was surmounted. But there was yet another preliminary obstacle, which had reference to the author's opinions.

My father, whom I always consulted about books, expressed grave doubts as to whether Gibbon was altogether safe and healthy for me. He had not himself read Gibbon's masterly work, except in extracts, but he knew something of the author's reputation for learning, and, alas! he must often have heard Gibbon classed with Voltaire, Hume, and others, and denounced from pulpits as an infidel. Liberal-minded though my father was, and ready to excuse and defend on occasion the milder heresies of Channing, he not unnaturally placed Gibbon in a wholly different category. He did not, however, put an absolute interdict on him; but, as I had sometimes expressed a wish for Addison's works, and as both Addison and Gibbon were unattainable together, he advised me to get the former. My heart, however, was set upon Gibbon, and though I could not vindicate his orthodoxy, I, not altogether guilelessly, reminded my father that his favourite orthodox commentator, Albert Barnes, had testified not only to Gibbon's ripe scholarship, which, indeed, was never in question, but also to his absolute honesty, accuracy, and fairness as a historian. Needless to observe, Gibbon won the day.

Vividly do I remember bringing the first volume home. With youthful glee I read till a late hour. I slept but little that night; the book haunted my dreams. I awoke about four on the bright summer Sunday morning, and went into the fields to read till breakfast-time.

The stately, majestic march of Gibbon's periods had

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

some attraction for me even then ; but the *Decline and Fall*, it must be admitted, was hard reading for an unlettered collier lad. Yet I plodded on until I had finished the book which, besides its direct teachings, brought me many indirect advantages.

I read no fiction then, nor have I ever been a great reader of light literature, but of poetry I was very fond. The gentle Cowper was my earliest favourite, a small second-hand copy of his poems, which I bought for eighteenpence, being the first book I bought for myself. It emptied my pocket, but I walked home, as I had walked to Newcastle (a distance of some eighteen miles to and fro) with a light heart, now and then reading as I fared along. Longfellow, Pope, Milton, Wordsworth, and other poets were soon afterwards added to my little collection. I read them all. Many passages have clung to my memory, a life-long possession, giving, with their music, sometimes inspiration, sometimes solace in the conflicts and sorrows of life. Cordially do I join in Wordsworth's benediction of the poets :

Blessings be with them and eternal praise,
Who give us noble loves and noble cares.

If they cannot relieve us of our cares, the great poets certainly ennoble them, making them less trivial and less unworthy of our manhood.

My first feeling with regard to Wordsworth was distinctly disappointing. I had heard of him always as a poet of Nature, and that he certainly is ; but my notion of Nature was then wholly external and material ; hence I looked in Wordsworth for something that I could seldom find. It was not till some years afterwards that Wordsworth took firm hold of me, becoming, as it were, part of my moral and intellectual being.

Thus early had I cast the husks and garbage behind

THOMAS BURT

me and begun to taste the "nectared sweets" of literature. Besides the standard works of our great writers, I subscribed to a few serials, mostly educational. These included the *British Controversialist*, Cassell's *Popular Educator*, *Historical Educator*, and *Educational Course*. Needing a good dictionary, I bought the *Imperial Dictionary*. To buy it outright was beyond me, but I took it in monthly parts at 2s. 6d. each. All this meant money, and that commodity was not too plentiful. Still, though I could not buy all the books I desired, I probably got quite as many as I could use wisely.

As my father's health, always precarious, had broken down, I was now, as I have said, the mainstay of the household. Every pay-day I handed my wages in full to my mother—a practice I continued until my marriage—she, good woman, always cheerfully supplying me with any pocket-money for books. I had no other costly tastes or habits. As a family we lived very happily and very frugally. Not a penny was spent on drink or tobacco, nor did luxuries of any kind enter the house. Whenever I went to Newcastle for books—and that was the only place where I could be suited—I journeyed to and fro on foot to save the train-fare.

Cassell's publications, cheap and solid, were a great boon to me. The *Popular Educator* was my chief handbook. Always fond of linguistic studies, I tackled the lessons in English, in French, and in Latin. I learned the Greek alphabet; but, beyond the letters and the study of Greek roots, I did not go into that language. Latin I followed more persistently, devoting to it the greater part of my spare time for nearly two years. A desire to understand Gibbon's references and quotations gave me the first impulse to learn that language, and eagerly did I wish to be able to read some of the great classical writers of Rome in their own tongue. That wish, like

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

many others, was never destined to be satisfied. Often have I chided myself for not using my time better, considering how very ignorant I was of much that I greatly needed to know. But regrets are useless, and I had to console myself by the thought that, after all, my studies were not wholly wasted. The knowledge I acquired of the foundation of our composite language saved me many a tiresome reference to dictionaries, when the general meaning of a word sufficed.

When, in my reading, I come across quotations in Latin or French, I can usually without much difficulty discover their purport. A greater benefit still came in a certain much-needed mental discipline. That, indeed, might have been found in more strictly practical and utilitarian studies. I lacked method and steadiness—my reading was, and ever has been, too fitful and desultory—and it was therefore comforting to know that for two years I had sturdily and doggedly applied myself to a fairly tough piece of mental taskwork.

My practice was to set myself at the end of the table armed with the *Popular Educator* and a Latin dictionary, while with slate and pencil I translated as best I could the Latin lessons into English and the English into Latin. For variety and exercise I occasionally strolled into the fields and lanes, usually taking with me long lists of words, written out in shorthand, which I had taught myself from Pitman's *Phonographic Manual*. These Latin words, with their English meanings, I committed to memory. In my other studies I followed a similar plan.

These strivings to obtain knowledge had no ulterior object, good or bad. They were wholly self-sufficing. The great aim of the workman-student often is to improve his social position. There is nothing that is not commendable in such a motive, but certainly it was not

THOMAS BURT

mine. Ambition I had none, nor had I any lofty aspiration or high ideals. Even the desire to fit myself for the service of human-kind, and to help my fellow-workmen, which came later, was then weak or non-existent. I loved knowledge for its own sake, and I felt happy that I could procure books and other mental outfit to gratify my tastes. One great drawback which I keenly felt was the want of seclusion. There was, of course, no study or library into which I could retire. The cottage in which we lived, though it compared not unfavourably with other colliery houses of the period, was not, as I think I have already said, of very ample dimensions. It contained but one room—a fairly large one, which served for kitchen, bedroom, wash-house, sitting-room, and all other household purposes. Overhead was an unceiled garret, without a fireplace, and with a window which seemed to have been devised before the window-tax was abolished. This attic served mainly as a lumber-store, though a corner of it had to be used for a truckle bed. Here, in the warmer weather, I was glad to seek refuge for my studies.

My mother, a model housewife, kept everything tidy, and did her best to protect me ; but perfect silence was seldom attainable. Though I afterwards schooled myself to study under adverse conditions, I was then very sensitive to interruption, even the presence of anyone beside me being at times a source of disturbance. Our own little family I could get along with, but visitors, of whom we had many, often bored me, especially such of them as were addicted to gossip.

Amos Etherington spent much of his spare time at our fireside. He was a fairly intelligent working miner, fond of talking, a good listener, too—not at all bad company if conversation was desired. It was to see my parents as co-religionists that he came, though he took a kindly

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

interest in me. My close application to study, which he could not but observe, evidently puzzled him not a little. One day, when he arrived as usual, and when, as usual, he found me at my books, he was prompted to inquire what it all meant. Addressing me in the Quaker-like style common among familiars, he said: "At it again, Thomas! What can thoo be aiming at? Thou won't join the church; thou won't preach or address temperance meetings. What's the meaning of all this poring over books, this plodding search for knowledge that thou won't use? Thou'll destroy thy health, and nobody will be the better for thy labours." That, or something like it, was the purport of Amos's string of interrogatives and warnings. "It is my way of enjoying myself, Amos," I responded. "I really derive great pleasure and satisfaction from my books; whether other people may benefit or not is a wholly different question." Then, having lately been reading *Comus*, I volleyed at Amos's devoted head the lines:

How charming is divine philosophy!
Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose,
But musical as is Apollo's lute,
And a perpetual feast of nectared sweets,
Where no crude surfeit reigns.

Of Apollo and his lute I had but imperfect knowledge; but no sooner had I cited Milton's words than I was seized with qualms of conscience lest I should have hurt Amos's feelings, and might be thought to class him with the dull fools for whom divine philosophy possessed no charms, and who had no ear for Apollo's music. That certainly was no part of my object, which was purely self-defensive. My answer, however, served one purpose; Amos was silenced, if not convinced, and he asked no further questions.

Besides books I had a few agreeable living companions.

THOMAS BURT

Chief among these at this period was Samuel Bailey. Two or three years my senior, Sam, like myself, was acquiring a taste for books. Our tastes were not wholly similar. Both of us read and enjoyed poetry; but, while Sam's more solid reading was in science, especially in astronomy and geology, mine was in history, biography, logic, languages, oratory, and general literature. Sam's favourite books at this time were Alison's *History of Europe* and Humboldt's *Cosmos*. In our rambles Sam and I discussed all sorts of topics, often, foolishly enough, beating our silly heads against the impenetrable, insoluble mysteries of life, immortality, and death. About the year 1857 Sam emigrated to Australia, at first following his old occupation of coal-mining. Wages in Australia were then, and for many years afterwards, exceptionally high, and, being a good worker of steady habits, he did well, and saved money. But, seized with the speculative mania which was then raging, he went into gold-mining, and his savings were soon dissipated.

Another book-loving friend was Frank Bell. Frank had a large collection of books, and was a voracious reader. The comic side of life, frolic, fun, humour, appealed most strongly to him. He it was who first introduced me to Artemus Ward, Mark Twain, and other American humorists. On Sunday nights, after leaving the Primitive Methodist Chapel, which Sam and I regularly attended, we took long walks, discussing, as I have said, all sorts of themes. A favourite house of call was the residence, in Whitridge Row, of old George Gleghorn. There we met many of the young local preachers and other Methodists, occasionally with a sprinkling of heretics, Secularists, free-thinkers, and followers of the late G. J. Holyoake. Old George, as we always called him, was a devout Primitive Methodist, and he had three sons who were local preachers—George, the youngest, just beginning, and

124

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

Matthew and Thomas. Thomas afterwards became very popular in the colliery districts as a local preacher. Matthew lost his life in the colliery explosion at Burradon in 1860, the first day he worked in that ill-fated mine.

George Gleghorn, the father, was a native of Old Hartley, a fishing and mining village a few miles north of Tyne-mouth. Among the simple-minded folk of Hartley there was not a little superstition. Ghosts, fairies, witches, and other supernatural beings were seen at Old Hartley long after they had taken their departure from other localities. Though old George had great believing capacity, and though he had unshaken, and unshakeable, belief in everything that was recorded in the Bible, he was full of scepticism as to the teachings of modern science. It was amusing to hear him argue with Sam, with whom he dearly loved a controversy. George always addressed Sam as "Tom Paine," because of Sam's heresies, real or supposed. "Noo, Tom," he would cry, "ye'll never persuade me that the earth gans roond and roond. Wey, man, we wad be tossed off; or, if we kept on, we wad never knaa whether we were on wor heeds or wor feet. Noo, look here! Aw leave Whitridge Raw i' the mornin'. Aw gan doon the pit, an' dee me day's wark. When aw come back to bank there's Whitridge Raw and the Evenue Heed, just where aw left them. If she went roond we wad never knaa where to find anything. Oh, no! she's flat as a pan-kyek; she's solid, and she stands where the Almighty set her six thousand years since. Get these infidel notions oot o' yer heed, Tom, or it'll be the warse for ye."

Meanwhile our home-life proceeded with its usual smoothness and felicity. Ours was indeed a happy home, cheerfulness and affection being the keynotes of our domestic harmony. My mother, somewhat frail in body,

THOMAS BURT

and often ailing, was a model housekeeper, as I have said, with great charm of manner and invariable sweetness of temper. My father was a man of exceptional intelligence, who always knew his own mind and was ready to say what he thought in words which could not be mistaken. If he ever attended school, it must have been for a very short time, since he began work underground when he was eight years of age. Yet he could not be said to be uneducated, or even illiterate. In early manhood he had acquired a taste for reading, and for a good book he had a keen and an unerring instinct. He was a capital letter-writer. On men and things he had very decided opinions, and alike with tongue and pen he could express them with force and precision. He was gifted with a fine sense of humour, kindly for the most part, but occasionally barbed with sarcasm. In his graver moods—and these were habitual with him—he reminded me of Wordsworth's "Leech Gatherer," whose

Words came feebly, from a feeble chest,
But each in solemn order followed each,
With something of a lofty utterance drest—
Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach
Of ordinary men ; a stately speech ;
Such as grave livers do in Scotland use,
Religious men, who give to God and man their dues.

Journalistic and other literary friends of mine who met him at my home, where, after my mother's death, he lived for the last eighteen years of his life, were greatly struck by his ordinary conversation, declaring that his words, if taken down as spoken, would have made excellent "copy."

As a public speaker, however, my father was not at all fluent. He was fastidious in his choice of words, and the right word did not always come to him at once. He was one of the very few speakers whom I have known

126

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS

who had the courage to pause in his discourse till he secured the phrase he wanted. Despite this lack of fluency, he was very acceptable to his audience so long as he continued to preach or to address temperance meetings.

CHAPTER X

HARDSHIPS AND CRUELITIES OF MINING LIFE

A Strike at Seaton Delaval—Fines and Forfeitures—A Mine-Manager's Foolishness—"Jimmy the Doctor"—Arrests and Imprisonment—The Punishment of the Best Men, and the Reason—A Remarkable Prison Episode—The Cruelties of Prison Life—Changed Conditions—Dismissal—Seeking Leave to Toil.

TOWARDS THE END of our stay at Seaton Delaval, about the middle of 1859, the usual happy relations which had subsisted between employers and workmen were seriously interrupted. The differences arose mainly in connection with what was known as "the separation system." This system was then in general operation throughout the Northumberland collieries, and was a fruitful source of disturbance and conflict. By agreement, the hewer was paid only for large, or round, coal, the small being separated and left underground. If small coal was filled up with the round a fine was inflicted, or, in aggravated cases, the tub was wholly confiscated. Obviously some check was needed, or a careless, dishonest workman would have sent the small away with the round, and would thus have cheated his employer. But the system itself was faulty, and encouraged, if it did not invite, deception and fraud. The most honest, careful hewer often found at the end of a hard day's work that he had been deprived of half his earnings by the "laid-out," or confiscated, tubs, while,

128

HARDSHIPS OF MINING LIFE

on the other hand, the careless or fraudulent worker not infrequently escaped scot-free.

The ordinary fines or forfeitures, severe and irritating though they were, probably would have proceeded without remonstrance or revolt ; but suddenly, without notice, the manager adopted more drastic measures. Not satisfied with taking, without payment, the full value of the tub, which at Seaton Delaval at that time amounted to about sixpence, heavy fines ranging from 2s. to 3s. were inflicted. Complaint was instantly followed by dismissal from the colliery.

The term of service was then monthly, and regularly, when the fateful day, the ninth of the month, came round, batches of men were dismissed, as a rule the steadiest and most intelligent of the workmen being the victims. No general union then existed in Northumberland. At one or two collieries, notably at Cowpen and at Seaton Delaval, local unions were now and then started ; but they were fitful and spasmodic, seldom continuing longer than a few weeks or a few months. On the part of the colliery-owners and managers there was great hostility to union. At Seaton Delaval every man who took a prominent part at meetings of the workmen, everyone who acted as chairman or who was elected on deputations to the manager, became a marked man, and was speedily dismissed from the colliery.

It soon became difficult to induce any man who wished to retain his employment to accept the chairmanship of a meeting. Well do I remember one of the first meetings which I attended in my early coal-hewing days. There was seething discontent ; the meeting-room was crowded almost to suffocation. One man after another was nominated as chairman, but all begged to be excused. There was a deadlock, when up jumped "Jimmy the Doctor," and delivered himself in something like this fashion :

THOMAS BURT

"What are ye all afraid of, men? Isn't it time something was done to put an end to the damned tyranny that is going on at this 'ere place? I knows well enough what's wanted; so do you. I 'opose and second that the gair comes up to-morrow. You that agree hold up your hands."

"Jimmy," nicknamed "the Doctor," whose real name I never knew, equal to the emergency, thus became at once chairman as well as mover and seconder of the resolution. He had recently arrived at Seaton Delaval from the Midlands, and, being a kind of bird of passage who flitted from place to place, burdened with no responsibility of wife or family, Jimmy had no fear of the manager's displeasure before his eyes.

Shortly afterwards the accumulating grievances reached a climax, and the comedy was changed into tragedy. A mass meeting was hastily convened, and after a sharp, heated debate, a resolution was carried by a narrow majority to stop the pit the next day. This was distinctly a breach of contract. As the law then stood that offence subjected the employer to a moderate fine only, but when committed by the workman the penalty was three months' imprisonment, with hard labour. On the second day after the stoppage the village was startled by the evil news that nine workmen had been arrested by policemen during the night or in the early morning, while they were yet in bed, and hurried off to North Shields, there to be tried before the local magistrates for breach of contract.

Sure enough, the rumour was true. The process was carried through with every element of harshness and inhumanity. The victims were whisked off without ceremony. No time was allowed for breakfast or for them to procure the legal advice which a fair trial demanded. After a hasty examination—it would be a

HARDSHIPS OF MINING LIFE

mockery to call it a judicial trial—eight of them were sentenced to two months' imprisonment in the county gaol at Morpeth. The names of the prisoners were Henry Ball, Anthony Bolam, Robert Burt (my uncle), Amos Etherington, Edward Davis, Wilson Ritson, Alec Watson, and Thomas Wakinshaw. Another miner, Thomas Beaney, was originally included; but he was subject to epileptic fits, and having been seized with one when before the magistrates, he was released.

My uncle's case was peculiarly hard. My aunt was seriously ill at the time—not expected to recover—and it was doubtful whether my uncle, after two months' absence, would ever see her alive again. She died, indeed, a week or two after the end of his imprisonment. Though a brave man of few words and little given to murmurings, he pleaded his wife's illness in mitigation of punishment. He was cynically reminded by the presiding magistrate that he should have thought of that before he broke his contract.

The prisoners' ages ranged from a little over twenty to between fifty and sixty. They were admittedly amongst the steadiest and best workmen on the colliery. Seven out of the eight were teetotalers, and the non-abstainer was a thoroughly temperate man. Five of them were members of the Primitive Methodist Connection, two of them, H. Bell and A. Etherington, being local preachers, and my uncle Robert a class leader and a Sunday-school teacher. For the time, and considering their lack of opportunity, they were men of exceptional intelligence. Wilson Ritson had the gift of ready, effective speech, which he used with tact and ability in his defence before the magistrates. He was a lover of books—specially fond of poetry. He lent me about this time a paper-backed copy of Bailey's *Festus*, which I read with great admiration.

Nearly all the men who were sent to gaol had opposed

THOMAS BURT

the strike. As a young hewer I attended the meeting and voted against the stoppage, and I well remember the earnestness with which my uncle argued and pleaded against hasty, extreme measures. When the manager was told that he had selected the most respectable and the most reasonable of his workmen for punishment—the very men who had most resolutely opposed the strike—his reply was that he was well aware of that, but they were the men who would most acutely feel the degradation of prison life, and they should have done more than give good advice; they should have gone to work notwithstanding that the majority was against them.

The governor of the prison soon discovered that the Delaval miners were very unlike the ordinary goal-birds with whom he had to do. So far as the regulations and discipline of the prison allowed, he treated them with every consideration and kindness. During their term of imprisonment there was a little episode that probably stands alone in the records of prison life. On a certain afternoon there came to the prisoners an unexpected summons to attend chapel. This was a pleasant interlude in the dreary monotony of the day, and was welcomed by many who cared little for ordinary religious worship. It transpired that a visiting prison chaplain, who was on his rounds, had found his way to Morpeth. Of the merits of his sermon I know nothing; but when it came to an end the worthy chaplain and his motley congregation were surprised by a novel apparition. The venerable figure of Amos Etherington rose in one of the pews, and in calm, steady, well-chosen words he moved a cordial vote of thanks to the chaplain for his friendly visit and his excellent sermon. Another prisoner from Delaval duly seconded the resolution, which on being put to the assemblage was carried with hearty applause. The astonished chaplain accepted the thanks in the spirit in

HARDSHIPS OF MINING LIFE

which they were tendered, and declared, no doubt truly enough, that though he had been a visiting prison chaplain for many years, this was a wholly new experience to him.

Innocent of any criminal intention and of any act which in its essence was of a criminal character, these men were hardly likely to feel that a blow had been struck at their manhood. Nevertheless, imprisonment and its associations must have been intensely repugnant to men of their habits and character. The "hard labour," which was part of their sentence, except that it was useless and profitless—mostly working the treadmill—perhaps did them no great harm; but the diet, the solitary confinement for so many hours every day, must have been very trying to men accustomed to an active life of severe physical exertion. Whatever may have been the cause, it is certain that upon some of them injuries were inflicted from which they never recovered. Henry Bell, then about twenty-four years of age, never afterwards enjoyed his usual robust health, and after lingering a few years he died, it was generally believed, from ailments contracted in the prison. He was a studious, bright young man, of great promise, who had already won considerable reputation in the locality for his power and eloquence as a local preacher.

The painful, cruel incidents here detailed could not well occur in our happier days. A strong, well-conducted union tackles and removes grievances as they arise, and a rash, impulsive strike in such circumstances is almost impossible. Were such a breach of contract by any chance to take place, it would be merely a civil offence, punishable by fine and not by imprisonment with hard labour.

Though there was no union at Delaval, the workmen acted honourably and generously towards those who had

THOMAS BURT

suffered in the general interest. The wives, families, and other dependents of their imprisoned comrades were liberally supported during the whole time that their bread-winners were in gaol. When the prisoners were liberated, they were welcomed home with great jubilation, and they were supplied with money to enable them to recuperate and to fit them for starting their hard work again.

A few weeks after the events I have just described, I received notice to leave Seaton Delaval. My uncles, Robert and Andrew Burt, together with some other miners, were discharged at the same time. There was nothing surprising in this, since on the ninth of every month similar missives were delivered to some of the workmen. We were sorry to leave the place. During our eight years' residence we had, on the whole, fared well. Delaval had given us many happy memories, many pleasant associations, and hosts of warm friends. To be driven away, rather than to go voluntarily, was not altogether agreeable; but in the temper which then prevailed among the higher officials there was no dishonour or stigma attached to dismissal.

My uncles were men of spirit and independence, quick in revolt against all tyranny and injustice. They took part in the miners' meetings, were often selected on deputations to the manager, and always spoke what they thought, strongly, clearly, and without equivocation. That they should be dismissed without ceremony was quite in keeping with the prevailing regime. But "What had their innocent nephew done?" they asked. A youth, then about twenty-two years of age, shy, retiring, unaggressive, whose relations with the colliery officials had always been friendly, it was certainly difficult to see what special claim I could have established to the honours of martyrdom. Hence my uncles urged me to see the

HARDSHIPS OF MINING LIFE

manager with a view to ascertain the reasons for my dismissal, and to plead for its withdrawal. That I resolutely declined to do. Had I been conscious of error or offence it would have been easy for me to approach the manager and to offer explanation or apology. But I felt thus early that, however great the hardship might be, the dismissed workman, unless he knows he is at fault, cannot well, without indignity and humiliation, ask his employer for reasons, for explanations, or for remission. In truth, I had no solid ground of complaint. Proper notice had been served according to agreement. Had I wished to leave, I should not have deemed myself under any obligation to say why, nor could I see what claim I had to demand from the manager why he discharged me.

Owing to the breakdown of my father's health, I was now the responsible head of the house, and the duty therefore devolved upon me to seek work elsewhere. It was mid-winter, when the Northumberland coal-trade is usually at its worst, and when employment was often unobtainable. Was I to join the forlorn army of the unemployed? Few things in our chequered life are more pitiful, more dismal, than for a man who is able and willing to work to have to beg—and to beg in vain—of a “brother of the earth to give him leave to toil.” Happily that fate was not mine. This was but the second time in my life that I had gone in quest of work: first at ten years of age, when, as I have mentioned, against my parents' wish, I asked to be a trapper-boy, and now in early manhood, when I sought coal-hewing. So far as employment is concerned, I have never asked for anything except common hard work, and happily I have promptly obtained it. Everything else, of the nature of situation or appointment, has come to me unsought, unsolicited. This I count among the greatest boons of a life fraught with many blessings.

THOMAS BURT

At the first place I tried—viz. Choppington Colliery—I immediately obtained employment for myself and my brother Peter, then a youth of eighteen years of age. My uncles got work at the same place, and thither we removed on New Year's Day, 1860, the manager of Seaton Delaval allowing us to leave before our month's notice had terminated. He and I parted good friends, and, in our final interview, he hinted that, for asking, I might have remained at the colliery.

CHAPTER XI

MARRIED LIFE, SECRETARIAL WORK, AND EXTENDED READING

Removal to Choppington—First Experiences of Secretarial Work and of Public Speaking—Conjugating the Verb *Amo*—Married to Mary Weatherburn—"The Angel in the House"—"Cavilling" for Places in the Mine—A Comfortable Colliery—The First Miners' Hall—Two Good Managers—Reading Shakespeare and Ruskin—The First Number of the *Cornhill*—*Unto This Last*—Joseph Fairbairn—A Rhyming Rivalry.

IT WAS ON New Year's Day, 1860, that we removed to Choppington, and there we remained until July, 1865. During these five and a half years I was not idle, my activities going forth in some new directions.

Young though I was, not having yet reached twenty-three years of age, new duties and responsibilities fast crowded upon me. Choppington was then a new colliery. There was, as might be expected, less cohesion, less public spirit, and less intellectual activity there than at Seaton Delaval. As yet there were no schools, no reading-rooms, no lecture hall, no co-operative store. But some of these institutions were soon to be established. In the sphere of social organization and educational advancement there was ample room for earnest workers.

I had not been long at the place before I found myself immersed in secretarial and committee work connected with the schools which had recently been built and which were about to be opened. These schools had been erected and furnished by the owners of the colliery at

THOMAS BURT

their own expense. They were managed by a committee consisting of representatives elected partly by the colliery proprietors and partly by the workmen. Towards the expenses of education all the adult workmen contributed, the colliery proprietors also helping with their subscriptions. On the committee the workmen had the majority of votes, so little of jealousy or autocracy did the management exhibit. Of this educational society I was a member, and the first secretary. I was also secretary of a federation of Northern Temperance Societies, which had just been formed. I had commenced public speaking, too, in a small way, and on nearly every Saturday night I delivered temperance addresses at one or other of the neighbouring colliery villages, while through the week I occasionally spoke at Band-of-Hope meetings. All this work, I need hardly say, was honorary, bringing with it some little outlay and no income. With these demands on my time, I could no longer follow with the same regularity the more or less systematic studies which had engaged me while at Seaton Delaval. My Latin lessons were now perforce laid aside. Books, however, I still loved, and amid the busiest and most stirring events, then and afterwards, I could always find moments, however few, for some solid, profitable reading.

While digging among Latin and Greek roots I had simultaneously been practically and effectually conjugating the verb *Amo*—I love. On this path I proceeded with diligence, assurance, and success. Hence, shortly after settling at Choppington, I married my cousin, Mary Weatherburn. Never was wedding quieter or less demonstrative. The marriage ceremony took place at Bedlington, about two miles from Choppington. Bedlington, like Choppington, is part of the constituency which I afterwards represented in Parliament for some forty-five years. On a cold, bright winter morning the youthful bride and

MARRIED LIFE AND EXTENDED READING

bridegroom walked through the Netherton fields to the old church, where they were met by my father. The three of us, with the officiating clergyman, were the only persons present. Whether in going or returning, or at the church, happily, nobody took the slightest notice of us. Next day I went to my coal-hewing as though nothing unusual had happened. And yet the event was one of the most momentous of my life. Beyond doubt this was the best day's work I had ever done, or was likely to do. In the lottery of life I had drawn a great prize. My wife, as I may now call her, possessed every attribute of womanhood requisite to make a loving partner and a happy home. Her educational outfit, in truth, was even poorer and more meagre than mine. Schooling she had little or none. She was a working man's child—the eldest of a large family—and in tender years, when she should have been at school or at play, she had to lend a hand at nursing her younger brothers and sisters or in attending to other household affairs. When afterwards I became thoroughly immersed in public work—social, industrial, and political—and when I could give little attention to matters domestic, it was supremely satisfactory for me to know that my home and children would be properly guarded and cared for by “the angel of the house.” A daughter of the people, she was also in complete sympathy with my public work, and throughout what was destined to be a long, happy married life she proved in every sense a brave and loving helpmate.

Of my underground work at Choppington little need be said. When seeking employment, I obtained the work I asked for—coal-hewing. My brother, fast growing into manhood, now commenced to hew, he and I working together as “marrows.” After a little training and practice, no better “marrow” could be desired. He was an active, steady, industrious worker, and a most genial,

THOMAS BURT

cheerful, agreeable companion. Hence, at work everything proceeded smoothly and pleasantly. We worked steadily and moderately, scarcely ever losing a day or an hour; and, though working hard, never distressing ourselves, as was then too common, by toiling beyond our strength. The custom was, and is, for "marrows" to change weekly from the fore-shift to the back-shift, the fore-shift workman in those days leaving his home shortly after two in the morning, and returning between ten and eleven, while the back-shift miner went into the pit about nine or ten in the morning, and ended his day's work about four or five in the afternoon. It was quite common then at Choppington for the fore-shift miner to remain with his "marrow" for an hour or two, sometimes longer, to push on and expedite the work. By mutual agreement I always kept the fore-shift, and, whether work had proceeded well or ill, I left the coal-face as soon as my brother arrived.

Paid by the ton, the hewer's wage depended upon the amount of work done and on the nature of his working-place. Once a quarter the working-places were "cavilled," or balloted for, and it was like balloting for money, the same amount of work yielding sometimes twice as much wage in one working-place as in another. Great was the difference in strength and skill between one man and another, while in some cases the difference was greater still between a good and a bad "cavil." Yet the cavilling system did justice in a rough-and-ready way between man and man.

Always a lover of personal liberty and independence, Choppington suited me excellently well. Nowhere was there, nor could there have been, less interference, less officiousness, on the part of the management. Tyranny there was none, nor any semblance of it. The chief mining engineer, who exercised a general superintendence

MARRIED LIFE AND EXTENDED READING

over the colliery, was Mr. W. R. Cole. The same gentleman had charge of Bebside and Walker collieries. It was to Mr. Cole that I had applied for and obtained employment. He then seemed to me exceedingly juvenile to have such heavy responsibilities resting upon him, but he was quite equal to his task. Mr. Cole was, without exception, the most courteous, even-tempered, gentlemanly employer I had ever known. Never did I hear a harsh, unkind word proceed from him. Yet with all this gentleness of speech and serenity of demeanour were combined great strength of character, firmness of will, and indomitable resolution.

Mr. Cole had broad, liberal views of life and its duties. He did not restrict himself to the performance of his important and somewhat exacting functions as a mining engineer, but he took a keen and constant interest in the social, educational, and moral condition of his employees. Besides the excellent schools which he and the colliery proprietors established at Bebside and Choppington collieries, a system far in advance of anything then known in the colliery villages, he was one of the first colliery managers in the north to erect workmen's halls, in which lectures could be delivered, and where the miners could hold their Union meetings. The halls were handed over to a committee of the workmen, who were told that they were to have the free use and full control of them. This was a new departure, which, of course, gave great satisfaction to the miners.

Trade unions had almost invariably before this time been suspected, denounced, and resisted by the employers. Some of the workmen, addressing Mr. Cole, said: "All this is well enough now that everything is going smoothly and when we are friends; but suppose days of friction come; suppose we differ, and a strike follows—what then? Shall we still have the use of the hall?" Mr.

THOMAS BURT

Cole smilingly replied: "Yes, of course. That will make no difference. I hope we shall never have any controversies which we are unable to settle without a strike. But, should we fail to settle our differences amicably, you will need a meeting-place more than ever; and you are much more likely to discuss the points of difference wisely, and to arrive at a just and rational conclusion, in a comfortable hall than in a public-house or by the roadside."

Next to Mr. Cole in authority was Mr. Ralph Pendleton. Mr. Pendleton had received a better education than usually fell to the lot of overmen and colliery under-officials in those days. He was a big, strong man, rather stern and commanding, not to say autocratic, in bearing and speech. He and I soon became good friends, and remained so ever afterwards; indeed, we never had any serious difference, but when we first met I thought him somewhat harsh and overbearing in tone and manner. I was ever easily ruffled by acerbity of speech. Courteously approached, I was always ready to do anything within reason, but I resented anything of the nature of dictation and command, even when proceeding from persons whose position gave them some right to masterhood. Before any serious friction occurred between Mr. Pendleton and me, however, I had discovered that his apparent harshness, if it really existed, was wholly on the surface. It was truly said of him that "his bark was worse than his bite"—in fact, he did not bite at all. In life and in practice Mr. Pendleton was a singularly kind, considerate man, most fair-minded, even generous, in his dealings with the workmen.

Always passionately fond of natural scenery, part of my spare time was occupied in taking long walks into the surrounding country. Though, like much of north-east Northumberland, the Choppington district is some-

MARRIED LIFE AND EXTENDED READING

what flat and unpicturesque, yet the landscape is not devoid of charm and beauty. Except close to the colliery, the fields and woods were then fresh and green, unblackened and undeformed by the smoke and grime of the pit-heaps. In many directions there were pleasant footpaths through the fields and woods and along the public highways. The well-wooded valley of the Wansbeck was within an easy stroll. From Morpeth almost to the sea, notably at Bothal and Sheepwash, there were pictures of sylvan beauty which would be hard to match in any part of the world. After my day's work in the pit was over, and I had rested awhile, thither did I often wander, book in hand, on the summer afternoons.

Among the authors I then read two are indelibly stamped upon my memory—Shakespeare and Ruskin. By the side of the murmuring Wansbeck, that “wanderer through the woods,” I first read Shakespeare's plays. Though since then over sixty years have elapsed, vividly do I remember the time and the surroundings. A new world of poetry and romance was presented to my mental vision. Except in short tags, Shakespeare was then wholly unknown to me. Often had I heard him denounced from pulpits; often had I been warned not to read his plays, the preacher not infrequently, all unconsciously, quoting him, so completely had the great dramatist's words and phrases entered into the very texture of our language.

I now read for the first time *The Tempest*, *Measure for Measure*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and many other of Shakespeare's comedies, besides the supreme tragedies, among the greatest creations of the human intellect—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Lear*. From no *edition de luxe* did I read. The plays published by Dick cost me one penny each, a sum well suited to my means. No matter that the print was small and the paper poor;

THOMAS BURT

no matter that there were neither theatre nor stage, neither actors nor orchestra. All the more scope was given to fancy and imagination. Nor was magnificent natural adornment wanting. The open sky, the venerable hills, with their woodlands and meadows, the flowing stream, the singing birds, together afforded a theatre and choir not wholly unworthy of the dramas and the dramatist.

To John Ruskin I owe more than I can ever tell. Of our other great writers who lived and wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century I knew then little or nothing. Macaulay, who had recently died, was greatly in vogue. I had read with enjoyment and advantage his *History of England* and some of his essays. Carlyle, Tennyson, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot I knew only by name. In January, 1860, appeared the *Cornhill Magazine*, with Thackeray as its editor. The price was a shilling, well befitting my exchequer. As soon as I knew it was on sale, I walked to Bedlington and came home the proud possessor of the first number. Thackeray's *Roundabout Papers* and some of his stories I read with much gusto. Before the year was out there appeared in the *Cornhill* a series of remarkable papers by John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*. These I read with avidity from beginning to end. Long and deeply did I ponder over them. The style—so simple, so beautiful, so telling—captivated me. The sentiments and thoughts, the soul and substance, were worthy of the style. From the standpoint of the orthodox political economist Ruskin was, beyond doubt, an arrant heretic. It is hardly wonderful, therefore, that *Unto This Last* received no warm welcome from the orthodox economist.

In a preface to the essays, when published in book form a year or two after they had appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine*, Ruskin says: "They were reprobated in a

MARRIED LIFE AND EXTENDED READING

violent manner, as far as I could hear, by most of the readers they met with. . . . Not a whit the less," he continues, "I believe them to be the best—that is to say, the truest, rightest-worded, and most serviceable—things I have ever written; and the last of them, having had special pains spent on it, is probably the best I shall ever write." Certainly upon my mind these essays produced a profound and lasting impression. Though I had, up to that time, read none of the great writers on political economy, I had been thinking upon, observing, and in my humble, untutored way I had been practically studying the subject. For even then I was an ardent, convinced trade-unionist.

In newspaper articles of the period—the early sixties—trade-unionists were often assailed on the ground that their ideas were fundamentally inconsistent with the teachings of political economy. Political economy was then regarded by superficial students much more as an exact science than in our day. It was laid down as an axiom—almost self-evident and wholly incontestable—that wages were absolutely fixed by the laws of demand and supply. It was confidently asserted that the so-called "wages fund" was a definite and separate entity; and that if, by the agency of union or otherwise, a section of workers secured higher wages, the advantages obtainable could only be temporary and apparent, and could not be maintained save at the expense of other and of probably less fortunate workers. No such arguments, if arguments they may be called, are ever heard nowadays.

Ruskin knew better than to call in question demand and supply as a governing element in determining wages; but he showed that there were other factors which, when dealing with human labour, must be taken into account, and which the political economist or his journalistic exponent too often ignored. Morality, justice, emotion,

THOMAS BURT

social affection, the temper—in a word, the soul—of the worker come into effective play as well as the laws of demand and supply. In the very first sentence of *Unto This Last* Ruskin strikes this keynote, and his booklet is a landmark in the history of the Labour movement.

Though at Choppington I had pleasant and most agreeable companions—chief among them being two brothers about my own age, Robert and Tom Grieves, with whom I took long country walks, bathed and swam in the Wansbeck, and engaged in sundry small sports and pastimes—yet I greatly missed my old Delaval comrades, Frank Bell and Sam Bailey, whose tastes in literature and whose love of books were similar to my own. My brother, indeed, was beginning to like books, and his judgment in selecting them was good. He and I were much together, but, being in opposite “shifts,” we saw little of each other except at nights and at the week-ends.

I had not been long at Choppington before I made one of the great friendships of my life. At Sleekburn Colliery, some two miles distant, there lived and worked as a coal-hewer a young man to whom I became warmly attached. Joseph Fairbairn—for that was his baptismal, full-dress name, though I always called him Joe—was certainly a remarkable man. He was essentially a strong man, tall and sinewy of frame, resolute of will, powerful and acute of intellect, sound of judgment, warm and loyal in friendship. Despite his meagre opportunities, Joe was singularly well-informed. He was a great reader, and fastened upon a good book with unerring instinct. In books, as in most other things, our tastes were much alike. Alike we were lovers of poetry. When first we met, both of us had been reading Bailey’s *Festus*, and I recited some favourite passages which had stuck to my tenacious memory.

Joe helped me to understand and appreciate Words-

MARRIED LIFE AND EXTENDED READING

worth. Sooner or later Wordsworth must have seized and taken possession of me. But that time had not yet come. In one of my early schoolbooks, indeed, I had read "Lucy Gray" and "We Are Seven." The music of these simple lays had charmed my boyish fancy and lingered in my memory. When I was approaching manhood I had added a small, cheap copy of Wordsworth's poems to my little library. Some of the poems I read from time to time, but they did not greatly impress me; in fact, the great poet of Nature, who afterwards became so priceless a possession, was, as I have said, at first a distinct disappointment. I suppose I must have lighted upon some dull, prosy, "drowsy-frowsy" passages which were Byron's aversion, and which Wordsworth, in his uninspired moments, produced with such facility and in such abundance. Joe was never tired of expatiating on the beauties and grandeur of Wordsworth, and my lack of responsiveness must have occasionally surprised him. When he selected some of the shorter poems—"The Daffodils," "The Highland Girl," "The Solitary Reaper" and other gems—and invited me to read them aloud, Joe's quick ear soon detected that I read with the spirit as well as with the understanding, and, thus tutored, I quickly became a devoted Wordsworthian.

Like myself, Joe was a staunch teetotaller, a keen Radical politician, and an ardent trade-unionist. He took an active part in the trade-union movement, then just beginning among the Northumberland miners. His views were moderate, his spirit conciliatory. Those who hold such opinions and exhibit such a spirit are seldom popular. But Joe, always courageous and outspoken, cared little whether the majority agreed or disagreed with him. His wide, accurate knowledge, his sound judgment, his strength of conviction, compelled attention and respect; and, had he been gifted with fluency of

THOMAS BURT

speech equal to his mental equipment and his courage, he would doubtless have won a position of commanding influence in the Miners' Union.

Joe had been brought up in the narrowest, sternest, and most rigid Presbyterianism. His father, a sturdy, true, devout man, had strictly enforced on Joe and his brothers attendance at church at all the services on every Sunday. When the sons reached manhood they revolted. At the time I made Joe's acquaintance he had wandered far from the fold and far from his father's creed, and had become, as he remained to the end of his life, a warm admirer and a faithful follower of Charles Bradlaugh.

A few years after the period of which I am now writing, Joe emigrated to the United States of America. Steady, industrious, thrifty, he had saved a little money, and in partnership with a brother he became the owner of a colliery at Streator, Illinois. At his home there my wife and I visited him in 1883. He died a few years afterwards, his end being a tragic one. On a day when the pit was idle, Joe had descended the mine alone for the purpose of inspection, and whilst underground an explosion of fire-damp occurred. How the accident happened is unknown, and never will be known. With characteristic courage and resolution he climbed the shaft and crawled to his home. But the fire had not only scorched his skin, but it had penetrated internally, and, after excruciating suffering, his strong, true, brave, yet withal kindly, gentle spirit passed away.

I have dwelt at some length on my connection with Joe, because he was not only a loyal friend and a wise counsellor, but his companionship was, no doubt, one of the formative influences of my life and character.

I may now briefly relate an episode which afforded me some little amusement. Soon after I arrived at Choppington I discovered that the place could boast the

MARRIED LIFE AND EXTENDED READING

possession of a poet. The air, indeed, was full of his fame. Shortly before, a sad accident had occurred. A little girl, who had strayed upon the branch railway, had been killed by the running wagons. In melancholy memory of the event some verses had been composed by a miner, John Kirkup by name. The production took the fancy of the uncritical villagers, who canonized the writer as a born poet. The subject was in itself tragic, and the verses were not without pathos and good feeling; but as a work of art the elegy left something to be desired, falling lamentably short of Milton's *Lycidas* and of Shelley's *Adonais*.

I had heard much of Mr. Kirkup as an intelligent man and a clever versifier, and I was curious to make his acquaintance. As he worked at nights and I during the day, it was some time before we met. A favourite walk of mine was through the fields towards Netherton. At the railway-crossing the gates, newly painted, formed a good background for sketching and pencilling. On one of my strolls I noticed that some sketcher had pictured the head and face of a youth, not ill-drawn, and underneath had written :

What will he be ?
Pray tell to me
If you can see
The youth's destiny.

To this courteous note of interrogation, I replied :

The query, friend, you here propose
Will not be solved by you or me.
But you're no poet each critic knows,
And, sure, a poet you'll never be.

Next day I found a rejoinder, somewhat bitter and acrimonious, showing that the poet had been hit on a tender part. Again I replied, applying a blister when

THOMAS BURT

a soothing plaster would have been more fitting and more humane. Day after day this mimic warfare went on until the scribblers had covered one side of the gatepost and had to turn over a new leaf by starting on the other side. What we wrote I quite forget, nor is it material, for it was, no doubt, poor enough stuff. But the contest waxed hot and furious. That the poet-artist was no other than Kirkup I felt sure. Though I still wished to meet him, I began to doubt whether a meeting now would be entirely pleasant and agreeable to either of us.

As luck would have it, we were fated to meet close to our battleground. Taking my usual walk one day, I espied a somewhat burly figure poring over the writing on the gatepost. I had proceeded too far to beat a retreat; but, not to interrupt the student, I branched off along the railway. But I had been seen, and I was not allowed to escape so easily. A stentorian voice called after me: "Hi, man! come here; I want ye!" As I drew nearer, I saw that my interlocutor was a stout, strongly-built man of middle age. From the descriptions I had heard, I concluded that this could be no other than Mr. Kirkup. When I saw his bodily dimensions I indulged the hope that I had not angered him too much, and that, in any case, the combat would not proceed beyond the verbal stage.

"Some fellows have been writing poetry at each other," he remarked, "and I want you to help me to read it." He was, apparently, puzzling himself, or pretending to puzzle himself, to decipher my latest production. Good-naturedly I helped him to spell it out. Then followed a dialogue something to this effect: "Man, I thought you had written that." "It is always open to us to think what we like," I responded evasively. "Did you write it?" "Yes." "Oh, well, it isn't so very bad; but you

MARRIED LIFE AND EXTENDED READING

might have been a little kinder." The criticism was just. Having thus frankly answered his question, I asked if he was the other scribe and if his name was Kirkup. He answered in the affirmative. We walked homewards together, shook hands on parting, and henceforth were very good friends.

CHAPTER XII

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

The Hartley Colliery Accident—Lax Management at Burradon, and the Consequence—The Author's First Letter to the Press—A Bolt from the Blue—"The Yearly Bond"—Forming a Trade Union—A Bad Place in the Workings—First Election as Delegate—Earliest Public Speech—Methods of Preparation—A Trade Union Revival—Before a Parliamentary Select Committee—First Sight of London—Alexander Macdonald—Immense Progress in Conditions of Pit-Life—Elected Secretary and Agent of the Union.

THOUGH THE Northumberland coalfield had long enjoyed comparative immunity from big explosions of fire-damp and from other mining fatalities on a large scale, there yet occurred during our first few years' residence at Choppington two catastrophes which resulted in a great sacrifice of human life. Early in 1860 there was a serious fire-damp explosion at Burradon Colliery. Some two years afterwards there occurred what became too well known as the Hartley Calamity.

In the melancholy annals of mining accidents Hartley stands alone. Never before had anything similar occurred, nor has there been anything of the kind since. The huge beam of the pumping-engine broke suddenly in the middle. The detached half, which overhung the pit-mouth, plunged into the shaft, and completely blocked the only way of egress from the workings below. The tragic event produced a profound sensation throughout the country and throughout the civilized world, and it cast a grim shadow over the whole district. I knew many of the workmen at Hartley, though I had no

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

relatives among them. I was early on the scene—one of the thousands who felt the keenest sympathy, and who would have been but too glad to help had help been possible. As is usual on such occasions, heroic efforts were put forth by brave volunteer workers, who could be had in any number, under the guidance of the most capable and skilful mining engineers. All in vain. For the first few days hopes of rescue were indulged in; but, as day followed day, it became only too apparent that the imprisoned miners were doomed to a lingering, painful death by starvation. Two hundred and four valuable lives were lost, four miners only, who were in the ascending cage when the fatal beam fell, being rescued alive.

Burradon belonged to a category, alas! too common. Colliery explosions have from time to time slain their thousands—yea, their tens of thousands. The explosion at Burradon did not differ materially from its predecessors or its successors. The investigation into the cause was, indeed, more than usually searching. The miners of Northumberland were then without any general organization. It was not then usual, as it is now, for the Home Office to be represented by eminent Counsel; but the Mines Inspector, Mr. M. Dunn, was present, and took an active part in the inquiry. Some philanthropic local personages—chief among them being Mr. Hugh Lee Pattinson, a chemical manufacturer—supplied money to engage capable legal gentlemen to represent the relatives of those who had lost their lives. The evidence showed that there had been great laxity in the management, and that the ventilation of the mine had been for long most unsatisfactory. Complaints had been made without avail, and some of the miners had felt such dread that they had left the colliery.

“There is some soul of goodness in things evil,” and

THOMAS BURT

certainly from the Hartley and Burradon calamities great benefits accrued. From Hartley emanated the Act of Parliament making a second outlet from mines imperative. Burradon gave an impetus to better ventilation and to more careful management; and out of the melancholy events there sprang that noble institution, the Northumberland and Durham Miners' Permanent Relief Fund.

The inquiry gave rise to much public discussion and to not a little newspaper correspondence. It possesses some personal interest to me, since in connection with it I wrote my first letter to the public press. That letter was sent to the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, and it was one of the few anonymous letters that I ever wrote. With a carelessness too habitual in regard to all my letters and speeches, I kept no copy, but I well remember that the general purport of it was to urge the necessity of better ventilation. As a result of my own experience, I pointed out that mines which were devoid of explosive gas were, as a rule, worse ventilated and less healthy than were those in which gas was found. I was at the time working in a place where the ventilation was insufferably bad, the only complaint I ever had to make at Choppington Colliery. The difficulties in providing good ventilation were indeed great. Hydrogen gas there was none, but "stythe"—i.e. carbonic acid gas—emanated from the strata in vast quantities. Nor was this all. The coal was dislodged with gunpowder, then the usual material used for blasting operations. After the first two or three hours in the morning the atmosphere became so completely surcharged with the powder fumes—locally called "poother reek"—that it was often difficult to find one's way about the roadways. At other collieries I had experienced something similar, though not quite to the same extent. All this resulted in a process of slow poisoning, and I felt, therefore, that, so far as explosive

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

gas acted as a stimulus to improved ventilation, it might be, and probably it was, a beneficent agent.

When I saw my first letter in print, I was not a little excited. The *Chronicle* was every day giving a full report of the proceedings at the inquest. At nights I read the report aloud, together with the correspondence bearing upon the subject, to my father and my uncles. My own letter I read with palpitating heart and faltering voice, wondering what effect it would produce upon my little audience. The letter, as I have said, was anonymous ; nor, so far as I remember, did I then or afterwards disclose the authorship. After I had finished reading, my uncle Robert, in whose judgment I had great faith, remarked : “ Noo, that’s something like the thing. That chap knaa’s what he’s writing about,” a verdict which quite elated me.

Towards the end of 1862 an important event occurred —important to the miners, and to me of greater concern than I knew at the time. Over the whole industrial horizon there was a cloudless sky, when suddenly there fell a bolt from the blue. Notices were served upon nearly the whole of the Northumberland miners, thousands in number, that their existing contracts should terminate, with a view to a reduction in wages and the reintroduction of the “ yearly bond.”

The “ yearly bond,” which meant the substitution of agreements which should be binding for twelve months instead of for one month only, was intensely hateful to the miners. The monthly system had been in existence for nearly twenty years, having been forced upon the unwilling workers at the time of the great strike of 1844. As showing the irony of the situation and the inherent conservatism of man, it may be noted that agreements for the shorter period had encountered the most strenuous resistance. With that love of jingling alliteration which is so attractive to the untrained mind, it was dubbed

THOMAS BURT

the "Monthly Monster." The "yearly bond" was now regarded as a bondage not far removed from serfdom, and at all costs the miners were determined to fight against its revival.

A mass meeting was therefore convened at Horton—a convenient centre—on the Christmas Day of 1862. Thither wended the miners in their thousands. Strong speeches against the reduction, and stronger still against the "yearly bond," were delivered; and a resolution pledging the assembled miners to resist the innovations was unanimously passed, amidst great enthusiasm. The Horton meeting was a complete success. Not only was it large, enthusiastic, unanimous, but it achieved its object. Forthwith the notices were withdrawn; no reduction of wages was enforced or attempted; and, better still, from that day to this, nothing more has ever been heard of the "yearly bond." The meeting, indeed, accomplished much more than its immediate object. Out of it sprang the present Miners' Union—not, indeed, the largest, but certainly one of the compactest, one of the stablest, and practically one of the most effective trade unions in the world.¹

Though not among those who had received notice, I attended the Horton meeting, merely, however, as an auditor and spectator. Little did I dream, when I stood on the outskirts of the crowd listening to the speeches, that so large a portion of my time, thought, and energy for the rest of my life would be devoted to organizing the miners of Northumberland and to directing the affairs of their Union.

At the conclusion of the Horton meeting a small group of miners, including some of the veterans of 1844, conferred together, and they resolved to try to form a general

¹ The Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association. This was written before that Union had become affiliated with the Miners' Federation of Great Britain.

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

union. Accordingly, early in the January of 1863, a delegate meeting was convened—again at Horton—and at this, the first delegate meeting of the present Association, some twenty collieries were represented. A Committee was elected, a President, Secretary, and Treasurer, all honorary, were appointed, and the Union was thus fairly inaugurated. At first progress was slow, though steady. At all the great collieries of the district, save two, notices had been served on the workmen. The proprietors of Bebside and Choppington Collieries, not being connected with the Coalowners' Association, took no action.

Choppington, being thus outside the area of conflict, lagged behind the other places in joining the Union. When a meeting was held to consider the question of forming a branch, opinion was divided. Some of the workmen contended it was best to "let sleeping dogs lie"; that, as we had not been attacked, there was not sufficient reason for us to unite; that everything was going peaceably and well; and that we had nothing to gain and might have something to lose by connecting ourselves with the Union. Others urged, as I did, that this was a narrow, selfish, short-sighted view; that, rightly considered, the object of union was mutual help; that we might not always enjoy such happy immunity from attack; and that, in any case, it was the duty of the strong and fortunate to assist the weak and the less fortunate. These arguments ultimately prevailed, and a fairly strong branch was formed at Choppington. At first I held no official position; but I attended the meetings regularly, and took some little part in the discussions.

There was not much of immediate local concern to us Choppingtonians. There were no grievances that called aloud for redress. Wages were good—certainly above the average of the county. There was no vexatious interference by the colliery officials. If any difficulty arose—

THOMAS BURT

and where a few hundred men are employed friction may occasionally be expected—Mr. Cole was always easy of access, and was invariably courteous, considerate, and fair-minded.

I remember only one occasion when we met Mr. Cole on a wage question. Though the average wage of the hewers was, as I have said, exceptionally high, there was one “flat,” or section of the pit, where the coal was very hard and difficult to work, and the earnings there were exceedingly low. A deputation met Mr. Cole to ask for an increase of the tonnage price in this part. Young though I was, I was asked to introduce the deputation and to be its chief spokesman. After I had stated the case, Mr. Cole replied. He frankly admitted that the work at the “flat” in question was bad and that the price for hewing was wholly insufficient. Our hopes rose, and we thought our mission was successful. But Mr. Cole had not yet finished. He proceeded to say that, while this particular “flat” showed a very unsatisfactory average, the general average of the colliery was considerably over 6s. per day, an amount then far in excess of the county wage. He and the owners had no wish to reduce wages to the level that prevailed elsewhere, but he could give no advance. He pointed out that while the “flat” complained of yielded a wage of little over 4s. a day, there was another section of the pit where the average wage reached about 9s. a day. If the miners would agree, he was prepared to re-arrange prices so as to bring about equality, or an approximation to equality. This, he would guarantee, should be done without diminishing in the slightest degree the general average of the pit, which was not, in his opinion, too high.

After Mr. Cole’s statement we retired and reported to a full meeting of the workmen. Nobody denied, or could deny, that the general average wage was high. Let it be

158

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

remembered that this was some sixty years ago, when an average wage for hewers of over 6s. a day was wholly exceptional. Nobody doubted Mr. Cole's *bona-fides*, or suspected for a moment that, in re-arranging prices, the workmen as a whole would be allowed to suffer. But after some discussion the offer was rejected, and the inequality continued as before. Some of the workmen suggested that the deputation should again meet Mr. Cole, and should press for an advance on the bad ground without allowing anything to come off the good. Personally, I felt, and said, that we had been met fairly; that Mr. Cole had justice and logic on his side; and that, unless we could accept his proposal, we had no case for argument. I added, of course, that it was impossible for me to argue a case the justice of which I doubted. My colleagues on the deputation took the same view, and this ultimately became the opinion of the majority.

A mistake had certainly been made. These inequalities, though often unavoidable, are a great evil, and they should be remedied whenever and wherever practicable. In this instance, too, as Mr. Cole pointed out, the area where the bad work existed was just opening out, and was gradually extending. The incident which I have recorded was illustrative of a weakness which is too prevalent, and which is not confined to miners or to working men. Theoretically, equality is loudly professed, and sometimes intemperately advocated, but in practice few persons will make even a temporary sacrifice to achieve it.

Henceforth, the affairs of the Miners' Union occupied much of my time. Early in 1864 the Choppington men elected me as a delegate to represent them at Council meetings, and shortly afterwards I became a member of the Executive Committee. That position I held until about a year later, when I was elected Secretary and

THOMAS BURT

Agent of the Union. Thenceforth, by virtue of my office, I remained a member of the Committee. This gave me an insight into the inner workings of the Association. As I had, in those early days, won a certain reputation as a pungent letter-writer and a keen controversialist, my colleagues on the Committee often asked me to reply to newspaper attacks on the Union and its Agent, such attacks, alike from members and non-members, being of frequent occurrence, and seldom wanting in bitterness and ferocity.

Meanwhile the progress in organization, though continuous, was very slow. While many of those who had joined the Union were fervid and enthusiastic, the great majority of the miners stolidly held aloof from the Society. Special efforts were put forth by the Committee to strengthen and perfect the organization. With that object, several district meetings were arranged in centres convenient for the large collieries. One of these was held at Choppington Guide Post, for the northern collieries, and another at Hartford Bridge, for the central part of the coalfield. Both meetings were well attended, a strong feeling in favour of united action was evoked, and the membership of the Union was greatly strengthened and increased. At these gatherings I was one of the selected speakers.

The Guide Post meeting is memorable to me as the first occasion on which I spoke publicly in advocacy of union. In the preparation of my speech I took great pains, writing it out in full in shorthand, and committing much of it to memory. Nearly all my earlier speeches were prepared in this way, and perhaps at the time this method was not without its advantages. Much writing has been strongly recommended by high authorities on the art of public speaking. No universal rule, however, can be laid down. Writing and committing to memory

160

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

is certainly a most laborious, not to say a slavish, process, and speeches thus prepared are seldom thoroughly effective in the delivery. When I got, shortly afterwards, into the full swing of public life, I was compelled through lack of time to abandon that practice, and though, on important occasions, I have sometimes made elaborate notes, and have invariably tried to master the facts, I have not for many years past committed a speech, or any part of it, to memory. This I mention for the advantage of beginners, though, indeed, I make no pretension to be an authority on public speaking.

The assemblage at the Guide Post meeting, as I have said, was large. At the outset there was a great disappointment. Mr. Crawford, then Secretary and Agent, who was deservedly very popular with the miners, had been announced as the chief speaker. From some cause, he was unable to be present. I, quite unknown then except to the Choppington men, was, if I remember aright, the only other speaker. The early spring day was bright, though somewhat chilly. At first the audience, too, was rather frosty and apathetic, though it gradually thawed, and towards the end of my speech it warmed into a genial enthusiasm. The keynote of my speech was the essential need of union as a means of improving the condition of the miners. I dwelt upon the long hours of the boys in the mines—then from twelve to thirteen hours a day—and the absolute need, on grounds of humanity and for purposes of education, of remedying the evil. I gave a realistic picture, based upon experience, of the miseries arising from these long hours, and of the unnatural starting-time of the boys—then three or four o'clock in the morning—and of the fore-shift men, who were usually roused from sleep by the “caller” at one or two o'clock. At the conclusion of my speech there was great cheering. Joe Fairbairn and others warmly

THOMAS BURT

congratulated me. It was, beyond doubt, one of my most successful speeches.

A few months after the commencement of the Northumberland Miners' Union there was a powerful revival of unionism among the Durham miners. Many of the largest collieries joined the Northumberland Society; but this was a mere spurt, temporary and evanescent. Durham, though smaller in area than its neighbour, was much the more populous mining county, having probably four times as many miners as Northumberland. Destined ere long to possess the biggest and one of the best-managed miners' unions in the world, Durham's time to establish a strong combination had not yet come. The miners, however, swarmed into the Union; but, with even greater impetuosity, they rushed heedlessly into strikes without counting the cost.

At Messrs. Straker and Love's large collieries and elsewhere strikes suddenly broke out. Funds there were none, and, though levies were imposed, many of the collieries declined to pay them. Defeat, therefore, was inevitable. Suspicion, distrust, and disintegration followed. Though in Northumberland the Union was sound and healthy, and was making steady, if slow, progress, it became abundantly clear that Durham and Northumberland could not be combined in one and the same society. It was equally clear that, unless there was to be a complete collapse of the Union, a separation must take place. In this crisis the Northumbrians took council as to what should be done. A resolution was adopted, by a unanimous vote, to form Northumberland into a distinct and independent Union. I was asked to bring forward a resolution to that effect at the succeeding delegate meeting. I did so, not, however, without reluctance, since on the face of it this had the appearance of being a policy of disintegration. In reality it was an act of

162

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

self-preservation, and, indeed, it was so regarded even by the Durham delegates themselves. The separation was effected after a very short-lived connection. In spite of strenuous, self-sacrificing efforts by a few true, brave, disinterested leaders in Durham, the Union in that county soon came to an end, and it was not until 1869 that the present flourishing society was established.

Apart from the special difficulties of the period—the seething discontent, the impulsiveness, the instability, the refusal to pay into the union by so many of the miners—it will be recognized by all thoughtful, fair-minded men that the two counties, with their wide area, their divergent conditions and interests, could not have been permanently kept together in one Association, under the control and management of one central committee. Concentration, consolidation, before expansion, was the needful watchword. I remember quoting Pope's lines as a warning :

Like kings we lose the conquests gained before,
By vain ambition still to make them more.

In June, 1865, Mr. Crawford and I were selected by the Northumberland miners to give evidence before a Select Committee of the House of Commons then inquiring into the grievances of miners and the general condition of their employment. This was my first visit to London, and there was much in the great city itself, and in the persons I then met, to excite interest and wonder. London itself, with its vastness, its ceaseless activity, its endless variety, its unpenetrated mystery, can never fail to astonish the rustic villager who sees it for the first time. Though I have lived in it for nearly half of my life during the last fifty years, its interest has never abated ; and though at one period or another I have travelled its streets and thoroughfares in all directions,

THOMAS BURT

it is still to me an unknown city—a wonder and a mystery. But upon that topic I cannot enter.

I now made the acquaintance—an acquaintance which soon afterwards ripened into friendship—of a remarkable man, Mr. Alexander Macdonald. It was mainly through Mr. Macdonald's efforts that the Committee had been appointed, and it was on his suggestion that Mr. Crawford and I had been summoned to give evidence. I had heard much of Mr. Macdonald, and I ardently wished to meet and to know him. At that time he would be about fifty years of age. He had a strong, well-knit frame, and appeared to be in robust health. His face indicated great power of will and determination of purpose, and his features were a faithful index to his character. Scottish by birth, the son of a collier, in his boyhood he had worked in the coal-pits of his native land. Owing mainly to his own efforts, though greatly aided by those free, or partially free, scholarships which abound in some of the Scottish colleges, Mr. Macdonald had, in his rising manhood, received a fairly good education. He had managed to save a little money, and, for a few years in succession, he worked in the pits one half of the year and went to college during the other half. Shortly after reaching manhood he left the pits and started a school on his own account. While he was occupied as a teacher, an agitation to establish a union began among the Scottish miners, and into this movement Mr. Macdonald threw himself with spirit and energy. He was invited by the miners to become their leader, and to the well-being of the mining community the rest of his life was given with characteristic singleness of purpose, ability, and devotion.

At the General Election of 1874 Mr. Macdonald was elected Liberal and Labour member for Stafford, while I, at the same time, was returned for Morpeth. His parliamentary career, some six years afterwards, was cut

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

short by death. While a member of the House of Commons he worked hard for the miners and for labour, especially urging, as he had done for many years in the country, the need for compensation to workmen for accidents, a subject which he had mastered, and of which he was the pioneer. Mr. Macdonald was a powerful platform speaker, but he was never heard at his best in the House of Commons. However, I am anticipating.

The Select Committee, to which I must now return, examined me at considerable length, my evidence filling some thirteen large pages of the report. The hours of boys, the employment of females on the pit-heads, the ventilation of the mines, their better inspection, and to that end a considerable increase in the number of inspectors—these were some of the topics upon which I was questioned. On reading the evidence given by Mr. Crawford, myself, and other witnesses, and comparing the condition then revealed with that of the present time, one sees what immense progress has been made in the interval.

In connection with my mission to London, it may be of interest to relate an incident which afforded me and my colleagues some little amusement. While I was waiting outside the committee-room prior to my being called in, I was accosted by a civil-spoken gentleman, who asked me if I was one of the miners from the north who was about to give evidence. On my answering him in the affirmative, he explained that he was commissioned to report the proceedings. He begged, as a favour, that I would speak slowly and distinctly, since there were so many technical terms in the mining vocabulary that witnesses were sometimes difficult to follow. Meanwhile Mr. Macdonald, a few yards distant, had been eyeing us rather suspiciously. Not having too much faith in colliery-owners or in employers generally, he was afraid that

THOMAS BURT

their emissaries might tamper with his witnesses. No sooner had the gentleman left me than Mr. Macdonald came forward and, with some acerbity of tone, demanded to know what the fellow had been talking about. When I told him, he broke into a laugh which rang along the corridor. "Ah! I see," he remarked. "When a few years ago some Tyneside miners gave evidence before a similar Committee everybody was so utterly puzzled that it was necessary to send for an interpreter. Perhaps the gentleman who spoke to you was on duty as a reporter on that occasion."

The days of my pit-life were now fast drawing to a close. Mr. Crawford, who had acted as Secretary and Agent of the Miners' Union with great acceptance and ability, tendered his resignation to become Secretary of a Co-operative Society. For the vacant place the Choppington miners wished me to become a candidate. I hesitated; indeed, for a time I positively refused to be nominated. Except that I was a devoted trade-unionist, ardently desirous to help my fellow-workmen to the utmost extent of my ability, the position had no attraction for me. Ambition I had none, or, if I had any, it certainly did not impel me towards active public life. As a workman I was quite happy. I set then and always a high value—perhaps an exaggerated value—upon personal liberty and independence. I well knew, or I clearly foresaw, that, as the servant of a large body of working men, I could not expect to enjoy the complete freedom which was so dear to me and to which I had long been accustomed. In the matter of wage the secretaryship possessed no overpowering attractions. The salary then was 27s. 6d. a week, out of which house-rent, rates, and coal had to be paid; in fact, my income would be diminished rather than increased by the suggested change of occupation. The Union, in membership and in money, was weak,

166

THE BIRTH OF A TRADE UNION

there being some four thousand members and no accumulated funds, while at one of the largest collieries in the county a great strike was in progress.

For money I never cared unduly, perhaps hardly enough, having regard to my personal obligations. Some of the points which I have enumerated—the smallness of the salary, the weakness of the Union, the pending strike—gave me hardly a moment's uneasiness. So far as I was influenced by personal, or in any sense self-regarding, considerations, my diminished liberty, my increased responsibilities, alone made me pause before accepting nomination for the post.

My fellow-workmen at Choppington were, however, in earnest in pressing me forward. After I declined, they held a second meeting, when they urged me more strongly than at the first. My friends, too, including Joe Fairbairn, in whose judgment I had great faith, plied me with persuasion and appeal, and at length I consented to be nominated. In the July of 1865 I was elected. There were, if my memory serves me, three other candidates, and I received more votes than all the rest put together.

With the intimation of my election came the strong appeal from the Committee that I should undertake my new duties with as little delay as possible. By agreement a month's notice was then required on either side; but when I saw Mr. Cole, he at once gave me liberty to leave my work whenever I liked. He, at the same time, congratulated me on my appointment; but he doubted whether I would like the situation, which he thought was in any case a very precarious one. He kindly added that, if I ever for any reason wished to return to the coal-pits, he would gladly give me the best work at his disposal should I think fit to apply to him.

I was now in my twenty-eighth year, some eighteen of these years having been spent in underground labour.

THOMAS BURT

I had passed through all grades of pit-work, from trapper-boy to coal-hewer. Beyond coal-hewing I had never gone, nor wished to go. On the whole I had been fortunate and happy. Except for a year or two at Murton Colliery, when I was, indeed, roughly tossed about, and when burdens were cast upon me far beyond my strength, I had greatly enjoyed my life and work. Often exposed to dangers, and more than once having been within the very jaws of death, I had yet been fortunate enough to escape with only a few scars.

I removed from Choppington to Cowpen Quay, Blyth, the most convenient place for the headquarters of the Miners' Association, which at that time had no members west of Newcastle. From Choppington I separated, not without pangs of regret. I had made many warm friends among my fellow-workmen there. There I left my father, mother, my only brother, and my brother's wife. There I had married, and there some of my children had been born. Joys and, alas! sorrows—sorrows which had cut deep and had left their marks—are associated with Choppington. In its little graveyard my mother, my only brother, my sister-in-law, and others who were dear to me, were ere long to be laid; and there they sleep the “sleep that knows no waking.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

Farewell to Pit-Work—The Northumberland Miners' Union and its Work—A Self-Imposed Vow—Attitude of the Coalowners—An Epoch-making Strike—The Miners' Wages—The Candy-men Again—Evictions and Retaliations—Miners sent to Gaol—Stories of Prison Life—Introduction of Blacklegs—A Black Chapter in Mining Annals—Sharp Controversy with a Coalowner—Joseph Cowen—Journalistic Acquaintances.

I HAD NOW bidden farewell to pit-work—a final farewell, as it proved to be, though I did not then think so. “Blessed is the man who has found his work: let him ask no other blessing,” says Carlyle—no unworthy or irreverent addition to the Beatitudes. I had found my vocation, or, more strictly speaking, it had come to me unsought.

For some fifty years my own life has been so closely connected with the Northumberland Miners' Union, and that Society has so often been the pioneer or helper in effecting great industrial reforms, notably in establishing saner methods of adjusting differences between employers and workmen, that it may be useful and interesting for me to devote a little space to the history of the Union. Indeed, the history of the Society might be worth writing in some detail, but that cannot be done here and now. I hope, however, with a due regard to brevity, to put on record some portion of the good work which the Society has accomplished.

The Secretaryship of the Miners' Union gave me

THOMAS BURT

entirely new work and heavy responsibilities. Then in its infancy, the Society was passing through some of the troubles of youth. In membership, in funds, in compactness and cohesion, it was exceedingly weak. There are now seventy associated collieries, with over forty thousand members. At that time the lodges numbered twenty, the membership four thousand, and the exchequer was empty. When I prepared my first balance-sheet there was but £23 in the hands of the Treasurer. Only at the bigger collieries in the steam-coal district had the Union taken firm root. All the collieries near Newcastle, with the whole populous mining area west of that town, held aloof from the Union. At one of the largest collieries, Cramlington, a strike had been proceeding for eight weeks, and there were no signs of a settlement. Prophets of evil did not hesitate to predict that the days of the Union were numbered. Even the stout-hearted and well-informed were not without their gloomy forebodings. For myself, I took a more sanguine view, my faith resting mainly upon the sturdy Northumbrian character. Nowhere in the wide world could there be found better material out of which to build a solid, enduring Union. Courage, resolution, loyalty to each other, readiness to make sacrifices for the attainment of a common object—these qualities belong in a pre-eminent degree to the Northumberland miners. Yet with all these fine attributes they are not always easy to lead. They are spirited, self-willed, stubborn. But their confidence, once given, is not lightly taken away, and though they cannot be driven, they may be led; and as a rule they are ready to listen to counsel, and to act upon it when it is given by those whom they trust.

Practically, the management of the Union at this time was largely—in fact, almost wholly—vested in the

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

Secretary, the President and Treasurer being engaged in following their ordinary avocations. To attend to the everyday affairs of the Society, to perfect and consolidate the organization, to conduct, and if possible to bring to a satisfactory end, the unfortunate strike at Cramlington—all this gave full occupation to my time and strength. Though I had not sought the position—nay, though I had indeed almost shrunk from it—I yet highly appreciated the distinction that had been conferred upon me. Now, after the lapse of fifty years, I still feel that to have won and kept, through many vicissitudes, the confidence of the Northumberland miners is the greatest and the most highly prized honour of my life. Having been taken largely upon trust, I was, in fact, deeply touched by my selection. I took a vow—silent, self-imposed—that I would do all in my power by honest, faithful service to merit the confidence which had been so signally reposed in me. Whatever mistakes I may have committed, that vow I have honestly striven to keep, and I have faithfully kept.

Before entering upon my new duties I paused to take account of myself and of my equipment for the situation. I put to myself some serious questions; I indulged in severe, faithful self-analysis, as honest and as searching as I could make it. What were my qualifications and my disqualifications for the important position which I had assumed? I was comparatively young, a little over twenty-seven years of age; I was almost entirely inexperienced and untrained. Time, indeed, would cure or mitigate some of these shortcomings. There were other defects, organic and constitutional, which could not so easily be mended. I was shy, retiring, unaggressive. By habit and disposition I inclined more towards quiet meditation than to an active public life, such as necessarily involved more or less strife, turmoil, and agitation.

THOMAS BURT

On the other hand, my instincts and sympathies were strongly and whole-heartedly democratic. I was a convinced, an ardent trade-unionist. Unionism had with me something of the spirit, force—I may say the sanctity—of a religion. This spirit I inherited from my father. Whenever as a youth I heard him praising anyone, my invariable question was: “Is he a good union man?” That being answered in the affirmative, all was right in my estimation, and the sound trade-unionist was forthwith enskied, canonized, and enshrined among my saints and heroes. This was perhaps a narrow standard of virtue, but it was not wholly a false or an unworthy one. In its essence the principle was sound and true, so far as it went. To be a good union man means—in those days it certainly meant—to be loyal and true to your fellows. Courage, self-sacrifice, were then demanded from the leaders who were battling for their own rights and for those of their fellow-workmen, always at great personal risk. In those days the leaders were persecuted, often dismissed from their employment, and not infrequently prevented from obtaining work elsewhere.

I realized at once that there was work enough, and work of vital importance, before me. The mere routine business of the Society—correspondence, account-keeping, visiting the collieries and addressing meetings—all this occupied time, and must be done. The strike, too, brought much care, labour, and anxiety. Over and above these everyday functions there lay a wide field for honest labour. On two or three points I soon made up my mind, and I set my heart on their accomplishment. The Union must be extended and perfected: the outlying districts must be brought within its ranks. In arranging wages and conditions of employment organized labour was entitled to meet—and must claim to meet—organized capital on equal terms. Hitherto the Coal-

172

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

owners' Association had persistently refused to receive representatives from the Miners' Union or to recognize in any way whatever the Society. Such frank recognition was one of the first principles to be asserted—one of the earliest battles to be fought and won.

By constitution, and by deliberate intention, I was more of an organizer than an agitator. I knew that if the Union could be made strong in numbers, in funds, in discipline, the members themselves would always supply driving-power enough to enforce any reasonable demands. The fatal error of rushing headlong into strikes for the removal of grievances, however real such grievances might be, must be avoided. Again and again had I seen unions spring into being, and after a short, feverish, fitful existence disappear through the leaders not having accurately measured the forces which they had to confront and to combat. This blunder I determined to avoid so far as I could.

Such were some of the leading aims and principles which guided me from the beginning.

Meanwhile the Cramlington strike made great demands on my time and attention. The strike began, as I have said, some eight weeks before my election to the Secretaryship. "What dire events from trivial causes spring!" Like great wars between nations, industrial conflicts oftentimes arise from small beginnings. Often, too, in the heat of battle the original cause of dispute is obscured or lost sight of; passions are generated which are inconsistent with the calm, reasonable temper required to effect a satisfactory settlement.

I need not dwell in great detail upon the Cramlington strike, but it cannot properly be passed over in silence. Not since the great miners' strike of 1844 had there been in Northumberland an industrial battle of such magnitude or of such far-reaching consequence. There had been

THOMAS BURT

none which involved so many combatants and non-combatants, or which had been so stoutly and so resolutely fought. Cramlington is one of the oldest and largest collieries in Northumberland. The strike affected two pits, Cramlington and Shankhouse, which together employed some six or seven hundred underground workers. The miners there were not migratory, many of them having been born at the place, and having spent all their lives there.

The strike originated in a demand on the part of the workmen for an advance of wage. In some parts of the mine the work was exceedingly hard, and the average earnings were below those of neighbouring collieries. It may be interesting to note, as showing the wage of hewers in Northumberland at this period, that a return was called for by the Union early in 1863. Sixteen collieries responded, including some of the largest in the county. The highest average daily wage for hewers was 5s. 5½d., at West Cramlington, while the lowest was at Gosforth, where the wage was but 3s. 6d. per day. The general average then for hewers was about 4s. 2d. At the time of the Cramlington strike the coal-hewer's average wage there would probably be near 4s. a day. The advance asked by the Cramlington men was moderate, varying from 1d. to 2d. per ton. With the present method of adjusting differences the strike could not have occurred, or if it had begun it would have been settled in a few hours or in a few days. But at that period, and for a few years afterwards, the Coalowners' Association positively refused to recognize the Miners' Union in any way. When the claim of the Cramlington miners was put forward it was remitted by the Cramlington Coal Company to the general Coalowners' Association. That Association appointed two of its members, Mr. T. G. Hurst and Mr. J. R. Liddell, as referees to inquire into

174

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

the merits of the case and to report thereon. This the coalowners called an "independent reference." The gentlemen appointed were thoroughly experienced, competent men; they were fair-minded, too, Mr. Hurst especially being very popular as an employer. In a certain sense, both referees were no doubt independent. They were not, either of them, connected with the Cramlington Colliery. But both were partisans, both were coalowners, both were active members of the Employers' Association; and, in a matter which gravely concerned the workmen, the latter were wholly unrepresented in the reference. When the strike had continued for a few weeks the coalowners offered to concede an advance of 1d. per ton on condition that the miner would "nick" the coal instead of blasting it without "nicking," which was the practice at Cramlington before the occurrence of the strike. Had this proffered advance been unconditional it would probably have been accepted, but the condition imposed was impossible of acceptance. I should be sorry to think that the offer was not made in good faith, but practical miners regarded it almost as a mockery, since the extra hard work of "nicking" would have been equivalent to a reduction, rather than to an advance, of wage.

In the earlier stages of the strike other proposals were made with a view to effect a settlement. Arbitration was offered by the Miners' Union. At first there was reason to believe that this would be accepted by the coalowners, provided the miners would begin work pending the arbitration inquiry. This proviso we were prepared to accept, but ultimately the owners rejected arbitration on the ground that they could not have the rate of wages fixed by outsiders. Once or twice a settlement appeared within sight, but negotiations were again hampered by unwise conditions. While, on the other

THOMAS BURT

hand, the Cramlington miners had power to agree, on the other hand the coal company seemed to be entirely under the control of the Coalowners' Association. Mr. Potter, the managing partner at Cramlington, was a kindly, genial man. Trusted by the miners, and exceedingly popular with them, he was eager to effect a settlement, and had he been invested with full power I think the strike would soon have been brought to a satisfactory end. A suggestion of his was voted upon by the miners, and the votes for and against were nearly equal, the majority in favour of continuing the strike being only four. Under our present system, vote by ballot and the provision requiring a two-thirds majority for a strike or for its continuance, a satisfactory arrangement would certainly have been effected. The most thoughtful, experienced, and intelligent of the workmen strongly advocated the acceptance of Mr. Potter's suggestion. But passion ran high. The younger men, who felt less of the burden and responsibility of the position, were carried away by their feelings, and they voted solidly against any compromise. It was said, too, and I fear with truth, that something like terrorism and coercion prevailed.

In addition to the usual evil accessories of a strike—the dislocation of trade, the loss of wages, the misery and destitution of families—there were at Cramlington evictions on a large scale, accompanied by disturbance, violence, and riot. After the strike had continued for some fifteen or sixteen weeks, and when it was becoming every day more and more apparent that a settlement was unlikely, the coalowners called upon the miners to vacate their houses, intimating that if they failed to do so peaceably and voluntarily they would be evicted by force. Nor was this an idle threat. A few days after the notice the village was invaded by a body of “candy-

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

men ” and bum-bailiffs, under the protection of a considerable force of policemen, armed with batons and cutlasses.

It was on a bleak, wet October day that operations began in a short row near the High Pit, Thomas Baulks (familiarily known as “Tommy Bawks”), the respected Treasurer of the Miners’ Union, being the first victim. Some of the miners had strongly barricaded their doors and windows from the inside, but Tommy offered no resistance, direct or indirect; and wife, children, and furniture were quickly turned on to the muddy roadside. At the other houses the process of eviction was slower. From the neighbouring collieries the miners had come in crowds—men, women, and children. The women and children were many of them armed with “blazers” and tin-cans, which they used as cymbals, to the accompaniment of groans, yells, and howls directed against the motley gang of evictors. This noise, though deafening and hideous, was harmless enough; but among the miners the portents were more ominous. There was a ground-swell of angry murmurings and mutterings, quickly followed by a volley of stones, brickbats, and other missiles. Only a few evictions were completed on that day. So threatening was the outlook that the eviction operations were suspended for a few days. I called the miners together, and harangued them from the pit-heap, pointing out the folly, hopelessness, and peril of resistance, and urging them to keep the peace. I further advised the occupants of the colliery houses to desist from barricading their doors and windows, and to submit in peace to the inevitable. This advice was fortified by a resolution which was unanimously passed at a hastily summoned delegate meeting which the Committee of the Association had convened at Seaton Delaval.

THOMAS BURT

So far as the strikers themselves were concerned, I believe this counsel would have been acted upon, but when the evictions were resumed the miners from Seghill, West Cramlington, and other neighbouring places came in great numbers and reinforced the Cramlingtonians. The crowd was big and menacing. Warned by the proceedings of the first day, the authorities had greatly increased the constabulary. Mounted and foot policemen were now present in strong force. A detachment of soldiers had been brought from Manchester to Newcastle to be in readiness for any emergency. On this second day the scene of action was transferred to Cramlington Terrace. From the first I feared there would be riot and bloodshed. The huge crowd was in a very angry mood. The evictors—a wretched, ragged lot—could not possibly have performed their miserable task in a way to please their victims and their sympathizers, but they were offensively rough and insolent in the discharge of their functions. Stones now began to fly through the air, at first a few, but soon they came thick and fast, like a hailstorm. There were present all the elements of a big insurrection. How so little damage was done is a mystery to me. The policemen were, indeed, well handled, and under extreme provocation they behaved with singular forbearance and self-control. Two or three of them received ugly cuts, but no life was lost, nor was any grave personal injury inflicted upon anyone.

At the time, no arrests were made; but a few days later six miners were taken into custody charged with having participated in the disturbance. They were tried and convicted at the Newcastle Spring Assizes in 1866, and were sent to Morpeth Gaol for periods varying from six to nine months. Their names were D. Moore, sentenced to nine months; T. Wanless and M. McGlen, eight months; Alexander Barrass, T. Dodds, and T.

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

Pringle, six months. Three of them were Cramlington men, and the other three were from neighbouring collieries. They were typical north-country pit-men, very different in some respects from the Seaton Delaval miners who had been imprisoned a few years before. The latter were nearly all teetotalers, Methodists, and chapel-goers. Of the Cramlington men, McGlen was an Irishman and a Catholic; Dodds belonged to a Presbyterian family, and attended the Presbyterian Church. He was an exceedingly decent, quiet man—so quiet that it was difficult to believe that he could have taken an active part in the rioting. But nobody can tell what even a quiet man will do in a time of stress and excitement, and Dodds himself did not say that he was wholly guiltless of stone-throwing. None of the other prisoners were members of any church or chapel, or attenders at any place of worship; and, though fairly steady and temperate in their habits, none of them were teetotalers. Ordinarily they were peaceable, law-abiding citizens; but it is not unlikely that, in the heat and turmoil of the evictions, they took part in the rioting.

During the whole term of their imprisonment the Miners' Union supported their wives and families, and, when the time came for the release of the first batch, I was deputed by the Committee to meet them at Morpeth, to provide them with breakfast, to pay their train-fares, and to see them fairly on the way to their homes.

Of their prison life they had some amusing incidents to tell. On the day of their entrance to the gaol they were taken into one of the ante-rooms, probably to have their names, ages, and other particulars registered. Among other questions put to them, they were asked what was their religious profession. All except Dodds and McGlen declared themselves to be members of the Church of England. Dodds said he was a Presbyterian. "Come

THOMAS BURT

along with me, then," said the prison official. Fearing, no doubt needlessly, that this meant complete permanent separation from his comrades, Dodds was alarmed. "What did thoo tell him?" queried Barrass. "Aw telled him aw was a Presbyterian." responded Dodds. "Wey, ye daft b——," said Barrass, "we're all Chorchmen here." Whereupon Dodds called out to the official: "Hey, canny man! Aw've myed a mistake. Change ma religion. A'm Church of England, the syem as the rest o' them."

The ex-prisoners spoke well of the governor of the prison. That functionary would soon discover that the Cramlington miners did not belong to the ordinary criminal class, and he appears to have treated them with as much consideration as the prison regime allowed. The only matter of serious complaint had reference to the scantiness of their food-supply. Some of them, indeed, suffered seriously from insufficiency of food. The diet scale seems to have been the same for all male adults, irrespective of age, size, and eating capacity. This was specially hard upon the bigger, more robust men. The disproportion between demand and supply inflicted severe punishment upon Alec Barrass. Barrass was a stalwart, powerful, muscular man, in the vigour and prime of manhood. He was over six feet in height, and weighed some eighteen or nineteen stone. He was a thoroughly hearty, genial, good-natured soul, full of fun, jokes, and humour, always having a cheery word for everybody when he had the chance of intercourse with his fellow-men. With the governor, Barrass soon became a prime favourite, and they occasionally interchanged civilities. Going his usual rounds one morning, the governor looked into Barrass's cell, when something like the following colloquy took place: "Good morning, Barrass! How are you to-day?" "Bad, sir—varry bad," replied the

180

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

burly prisoner. "I am sorry to hear that. Shall I send the doctor?" "The doctor!" responded Barrass rather contemptuously. "No, damned a one, sir. Thank God Aw divvent need the doctor. Send the butcher."

The strike was now practically over. From its commencement till the last of the men were paid off by the Miners' Union it had continued for about a year. Long before its termination, however, it was but too apparent that we were hopelessly beaten. For a while after the evictions Cramlington was a deserted village. The old hands were widely scattered, some of them sheltered by their friends, some finding homes at Bedlington, Blyth, and surrounding places. To those who had house-rent to pay, the Union allowed 2s. 6d. per week towards the cost. Ere long efforts were made to carry out the coal-owners' expressed determination to work the pits with non-unionists. With Northumberland miners that was an impossibility. Abortive attempts were made to bring miners from other districts. Batches of men, mostly poor wastrels, scarcely any of whom appeared to be miners or capable of performing any kind of mining work, were brought from the Staffordshire potteries district. They were met by our Treasurer, Mr. Baulks, and myself at Newcastle, and were induced, on payment of their train-fares, to return to their homes. In the part we then played Mr. Baulks and I no doubt ran some risk of imprisonment, and once or twice we narrowly escaped from the detectives who were upon our track. These, however, were clearly more or less sham attempts to re-staff the pits, the object apparently being to induce the strikers to resume work rather than effectually to replace them by new hands.

But towards the end of the year a more serious, resolute, and as it proved a more successful, movement was

THOMAS BURT

inaugurated. Some four hundred and twenty Cornish miners, with their wives and families, were brought to Cramlington. They were strictly guarded. No access to them by outsiders was possible, and they were taken direct by rail to the collieries. The deserted village was now re-peopled, and the long, stoutly fought contest was at an end.

The Cramlington strike concluded a black and dismal chapter in the annals of Northumberland labour struggles. Strikes, indeed, there have been since ; but, except on a small scale, and spasmodically, there have been no further evictions, riots, or serious disturbances in the Northumberland coalfield for the last fifty years. The actual outlay on the strike must have exceeded £10,000. That amount would be trebled if the loss in wages is added. What the cost was in suffering to the strikers, their wives and families cannot be estimated. The loss, direct and indirect, to the employers is unknown, and in all probability it never will be known ; but it must have been enormous. As regards the object sought—an advance of wages—the miners, as I have said, were absolutely defeated. But it is impossible—and, if possible, it would be futile—to try to make out a profit and loss account. The balance would be largely on the debit side.

Yet the strike was not without its lessons of warning and encouragement. Extremists on both sides must have been taught how desirable it was, and is, to find better methods of adjusting differences. It was said at the time, and was firmly and widely believed by the miners, that in so stubbornly resisting the claim for such a moderate advance the coalowners were animated by a determination to destroy the Miners' Union. That might or might not be desired or intended. If that was the object, it completely failed. The Union came out

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

of the strike much stronger in every respect than it was when the strike began. The Cramlington men stood firmly and resolutely together from the beginning to the end ; not a single man deserted from the ranks. Except for the ebullition of disorder at the time of the evictions, the behaviour of the miners was entirely irreproachable.

In addition to the ordinary subscriptions, levies varying in amount from 1s. to 1s. 6d. per fortnight, according to the necessities of the strikers, were imposed upon the members at the several collieries ; and, though the wages were then exceedingly low, subscriptions and levies were paid by everyone with steadiness and regularity. The miners had, in fact, learnt the first and greatest lesson of union—absolute confidence in themselves and in each other—a lesson which they have never forgotten.

Though the strike began without funds, it ended with a balance of some £700 in hand. Prior to the strike the practice had been to keep any money at the respective collieries. Acting on my advice, the £700 was now banked in the names of trustees, and the ordinary subscriptions were paid to the General Treasurer, the savings being regularly banked and added to the funds of the Union.

At this period there appeared in the Newcastle newspapers many letters bitterly attacking the Cramlington miners and the miners in general. To the most important of these I replied. I kept no copies of these epistles ; nor do I suppose that they would now be of any use or interest. One of these letters, however, clings to my memory, mainly because it produced some impression, and it brought me some life-long friends.

Opening the *Newcastle Chronicle* one November morning of 1865, I observed a long letter signed “A Coalowner.” From beginning to end the letter was a fierce diatribe against the strikers, the Miners’ Union, and the Secretary

THOMAS BURT

of the Union. The extravagance of the Coalowner's vituperation did little more than amuse me, but I soon discovered that the letter was taken more seriously by others. The Miners' National Conference was at the time sitting in Newcastle, under the presidency of Mr. Macdonald. The coalowner's letter was brought before the Conference, and it and its anonymous writer were denounced in no measured terms. The feeling of the Conference was that the coalowner should not go unanswered, and a resolution was moved that the President should be requested to reply. I suggested that such a letter could very well be ignored; but that, if a reply was thought desirable, I, as the person chiefly concerned, should answer the letter. Mr. Macdonald concurred in that view. At that time I was rather fond of controversy, and was not wholly without certain gifts of sarcasm and invective. These were kept in good working order by the venomous attacks to which I and the miners were almost daily subjected. I felt that this was an occasion when my gifts, such as they were, might justly be allowed full scope. I have happily forgotten nearly everything that I wrote, but it would be quite safe to say that, though less coarse, less personal, and less vituperative than the attack, my reply was not less pungent or less acrimonious than the coalowner's letter.

My letters to the press, and especially the controversy with the coalowner, attracted the attention of Mr. Joseph Cowen, proprietor of the Newcastle daily and weekly *Chronicles*, and afterwards the distinguished senior member for Newcastle. The *Chronicle*—then and always a high-toned, ably conducted newspaper—was in those days pronouncedly Radical and progressive in its politics. It was one of the few newspapers, London or provincial, which boldly advocated trade unions, co-operation, and other democratic movements. I was then quite

184

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

unknown to Mr. Cowen ; but, through my friend, Richard Fynes, he invited me to an interview at the *Chronicle* office. When, shortly afterwards, I accepted this invitation, Mr. Cowen gave me a hearty greeting, and introduced me to the leading writers of the *Chronicle* as the “young pitman who had so effectively answered and silenced the coalowner.”

Through Mr. Cowen I made the acquaintance of the then members of the literary staff of his newspapers—a body of very notable men, ready, powerful writers, of strong Radical convictions. With Mr. W. E. Adams, one of the staff, and with Mr. Cowen himself, the intimacy thus begun soon ripened into a close and life-long companionship and friendship. Of Mr. Adams and Mr. Cowen I may have something to say later, and I should like to say more than time and space will allow. My senior by a few years, both were then in the prime of life, just a little over thirty years of age. Mr. Adams was a ready, effective writer. He was a man of strong, earnest convictions. Many years afterwards, Mr. Cowen, speaking scornfully of the type of journalist who could write with equal facility for either political party, said : “There’s your friend Adams. Poor though he is, if anyone offered him a thousand pounds for writing a line contrary to his convictions, nothing could ever induce him to do so.” By trade Mr. Adams was a printer ; but early in life, exhibiting singular literary ability, he attracted Mr. Cowen’s attention, and had recently been appointed on the permanent staff of the *Chronicle*. He was a clever, able journalist, a faithful, warm friend, and a delightful companion.

Mr. Cowen, then immensely popular on Tyneside, afterwards won a national reputation as a powerful Parliamentary orator. He was, indeed, a many-sided man, of brilliant qualities, of encyclopædic knowledge,

THOMAS BURT

and of manifold activities. He was a first-class administrator. A large employer of labour, he had inherited a great and varied business, which he further extended and developed. He was generous, kind-hearted, public-spirited, giving liberally and unostentatiously to individuals as well as to the democratic movements in which he was interested. Public life had great attractions for him, and he devoted much time to his newspapers, advising, directing, writing, and dictating articles. Mr. Cowen was certainly a great journalist, a good organizer, gifted with singular powers of utterance alike with tongue and pen.

A few weeks after my acquaintance with Mr. Cowen began, a rumour—wholly unfounded—arose to the effect that I had resigned my Secretaryship of the Miners' Union, whereupon Mr. Cowen, much to my surprise, offered me a position as a writer for his papers. The salary, he explained, would not at the beginning be large, though the amount he named was greatly in excess of any income I had ever received, and was, in fact, more than double the wage I was then paid by the miners. Money was never a temptation to me, and even thus early I had resolved that, unless I had serious differences with the miners, I should remain with them for life, or as long as the Union, then very precarious, existed.

I warmly thanked Mr. Cowen, explained to him that my rumoured resignation was without foundation, that I was not leaving the miners, nor did I intend to leave them. Mr. Cowen, who then and always took a keen interest in the Northumberland miners, expressed his satisfaction with this statement, said he thought I could be of great service to the miners and to the Labour movement generally, and hoped I would long continue to occupy the position I held. He was good enough to add that, if circumstances or inclination ever made it desirable

THE LAST STRIKE ON THE OLD PATTERN

for me to change my vocation, he hoped I would let him know, and that, whatever happened, I was never to think of going back to my employment underground.

Before we separated, Mr. Cowen complimented me on my letters to the papers. He said I evidently possessed some aptitude for writing. He strongly advised me—as, indeed, he often did afterwards—to cultivate and make the best of such literary talents as I possessed. As a young man who had just a few months before left the coal-face, I naturally felt somewhat flattered and elated by this unlooked-for appreciation from such a man as Mr. Cowen.

CHAPTER XIV

THE POLITICAL ECONOMISTS AND LABOUR

A New Abode and New Friends—A Debating Class—Wider Reading—George Eliot—Adam Smith and J. S. Mill on Trade Unions—Differences with the Economists—The Case of Two Neighbouring Collieries—The Fate of the Wages Fund Theory—What the Political Economists Forgot.

BLYTH, WHICH WAS to be my abode for about seven years, gave me new work, new surroundings, and, to some extent, new society. The town, which has developed rapidly during the last few years, is a seaport on the East Coast some eight miles north of Tynemouth. Between Seaton Sluice and Blyth, a space of three or four miles, is one of the best sandy beaches I have ever seen. On fine mornings, when I could find time, I delighted to stroll along this attractive natural promenade, often alone, sometimes accompanied by a friend. In the summer months I bathed in the sea, Richard Fynes at times accompanying me in my walks and flotations. Both of us could swim, though not too confidently when we suspected that a firm foothold was too far below us.

There was an excellent Mechanics' Institute at Blyth, very good indeed for the time and the size of the place. The library contained some four or five thousand well-selected volumes. Connected with the institute was a debating society, which I attended occasionally. As the debating class met on a night when I had a meeting of

THE POLITICAL ECONOMISTS

my own, I could seldom be present. My meetings, however, commenced quite an hour earlier than those of the debating class, so that, when I was not too far away, I could look in for an hour.

The topics discussed were of the usual debating-class order—that is to say, they were often of a somewhat commonplace character. Once, however, a member, Dr. Alexander Trotter, suggested a livelier subject: “Burns and Shakespeare: Which was the Greater Poet?” The doctor, a genuine Scot, championed the supremacy of his great countryman, Burns. I reached the meeting in time to hear the doctor’s opening speech. Shakespeare, he admitted, was not without merit as a poet, but he was often coarse and indelicate in his phraseology. Nobody would ever dream of reading Shakespeare aloud in the family circle. The doctor did not say, though he certainly implied, that Burns afforded fit and safe reading in any company. Intelligent, witty, clever, Dr. Trotter was an inveterate joker, and it was difficult at times to know whether he was “funning” or in earnest. I remember that he concluded an effective speech by reciting, with immense gusto, the well-known lines from “Tam o’ Shanter”:—

Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious,
O’er a’ the ills o’ life victorious.

“Where in Shakespeare,” he triumphantly demanded, “can you find anything to equal that?” We were all of us admirers of Burns; yet, in spite of the doctor’s eloquent advocacy, we declared by an overwhelming vote in favour of Shakespeare, some of us, indeed, being so benighted as to assert that he is the world’s greatest poet.

The library of the Mechanics’ Institute gave me the opportunity to read some books which were then new to me, among them being, I remember, *Adam Bede* and

THOMAS BURT

other of George Eliot's novels. My appetite for Ruskin had been whetted by his *Unto This Last*, which I had read with care and keen appreciation. Ruskin's works were at that time beyond the reach of my slender purse. Now I read with delight his *Crown of Wild Olive*, his *Sesame and Lilies*, and other of his smaller books. These, together with his *Modern Painters*, I soon afterwards added to my own little library, as well as a complete set of George Eliot's works. Next to Wordsworth, I do not think any writer has influenced me more deeply and more healthily than Ruskin.

There were other books which I then read and studied with care, including Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Mill's *Political Economy*. This was not a kind of literature to borrow from public libraries, but to have in one's own possession. On political economy I had then read little or nothing; but I had thought a great deal about it, and, as a result of my experience and observation, I was beginning to call in question some of the conclusions of its professors, so far as these related to labour and the wages of the workers. The newspapers of that period—1865–70—almost without exception were hostile to workmen's unions, and they demonstrated to their own satisfaction, from the teachings of political economy, how impossible it was for the unions to have any influence whatever upon wages, or to effect any real and permanent improvement in the labourer's condition.

In reading Adam Smith and J. S. Mill, I was pleasantly surprised to find that they strongly approved of working men's combinations. Smith pointed out that the employers, being fewer in number than the workmen, could combine much more easily, and that while the law then authorized, or at least did not prohibit, their combination, it did prohibit workmen's unions. "Masters," he wrote,

THE POLITICAL ECONOMISTS

“are always and everywhere in a tacit and uniform combination not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate.” Even more emphatically does John Stuart Mill encourage working men to combine. He asserts that “poor labourers who have to do with rich employers may remain for long without the amount of wages which the demand for their labour would justify, unless, in vernacular phrase, they ‘stood out for it’; and how can they stand out for terms without organized concert? I do not hesitate to say that associations of labourers, of a nature similar to trade unions, far from being a hindrance to a free market for labour, are the necessary instrumentality of that free market, the indispensable means of enabling the sellers of labour to take due care of their own interests under a system of competition.”

Heretofore my reading for the most part had been desultory and more or less aimless, directed mainly by inclination and taste; but in the position which I now held I felt it incumbent upon me to know how far the doctrines of political economy had a direct bearing upon the interests of labour and upon the basis of workmen’s unions. Some of the principles of political economy I had never doubted. Demand and supply and competition are factors which always have to be reckoned with. They may be modified, but they cannot be abolished. Nor do they always affect the worker injuriously. If they at times bring evil to him, they often benefit him. They can never be wisely ignored. In the necessity for union and its value, the study of political economy, if possible, still further confirmed my faith.

For Mill I had great admiration, but this did not induce me to accept his opinions and statements without question. When he declared that “demand for commodities is not a demand for labour,” I see that I

THOMAS BURT

had put a note of interrogation opposite the statement. It is now generally recognized by political economists that demand for commodities always means more or less demand for the labour that produces them.

There were other postulates of the economists to which I gave much thought and to which I could not yield a ready assent. On two of these I shall briefly comment—namely, first, the statement that labour is an ordinary commodity, the price of which is absolutely fixed by the economic laws which determine the price of other commodities; and, second, the so-called wages fund theory, which, by an iron law, it was alleged, made it impossible for trade unions to modify wages in the slightest degree.

Walter Bagehot, with his characteristic acuteness and sagacity, remarks that political economy “is an abstract science which labours under a special hardship. Those who are conversant with its abstractions are usually without a true contact with its facts; those who are in contact with its facts have usually little sympathy with and little cognisance of its abstractions.”

Of its abstractions I knew nothing at that time—1865—not then having read a line on the subject of political economy by any of its accepted exponents. I knew, however, that there were no two collieries in Northumberland at which the average wage of the coal-hewers was exactly the same. At Seaton Delaval, where I had worked, I lived within sight of another colliery, Cramlington. Seaton Delaval and Cramlington were in many respects similar. Both were large collieries; many of the proprietors of both were the same men; they were working the same seams of coal; their produce was sent to the same market and was sold at the same price; the workmen were of the same class. One would have expected that wages would have been alike, or not widely different, at the respective places, and yet the

192

THE POLITICAL ECONOMISTS

wage of the coal-getter was quite a shilling a day higher at Delaval than at Cramlington. The working hours of the hewers were longer at Cramlington than at Delaval, and it was well known that for many years the latter colliery had been working without profit. But these differences should have been in favour of Cramlington paying a higher wage than its neighbouring colliery. So much for the price, or wage, of labour. As to other commodities, the provision merchants at the two places sold their goods at or about the same prices.

What was the cause, or what were the causes, of this wide difference in the amount of wage paid at the collieries mentioned? I do not know, but I concluded that there must be other factors operating in determining wages besides those noted by the political economists, and that, if it be correct to call labour a commodity, its price certainly does not seem to be fixed on the same principles as those that determine the price of other mercantile commodities.

As to the wages fund theory, its essence appears to be that a certain portion of capital is used exclusively for the payment of wages, and that the labourer cannot receive more in wages than that capital will allow. On that assumption the rate of wages is regulated solely by the ratio between the number of labourers and the amount of the wages fund. This was the doctrine of Adam Smith, Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, and all the older political economists.

On this theory trade unions were, indeed, powerless, or almost powerless, to influence wages. Wages, it was asserted, could only be raised by increasing that portion of capital which goes to their payment, or by reducing the number of labourers among whom the capital was divided. "If the labourers increase faster than capital," says McCulloch, "their wages will be reduced; and if

THOMAS BURT

they increase slower, they will be augmented. . . . Every scheme for improving the condition of the labourer which is not bottomed on this principle, or which has not an increase of the ratio of capital to population for its object, must be completely nugatory and ineffectual." "If wages are higher at one time or place than another," says J. S. Mill, ". . . it is for no other reason than because capital bears a greater proportion to population. . . . The condition of the class can be bettered in no other way than by altering that proportion to their advantage; and every scheme for their benefit which does not proceed on this as its foundation is, for all permanent purposes, a delusion." From all this, Ricardo's inference that "the rate of profits can never be increased but by a fall in wages" seems to be sound.

But is the premise sound? That nowadays need not be discussed, since the wages fund theory, as expounded by Mill and others, has been abandoned as untenable.

W. T. Thornton, in his book, *On Labour*, was the first to shake, if not to shatter, the dogma. Thornton, too, in the same treatise, wrote a most powerful vindication of trade-unionism. Thornton's arguments against the wages fund theory so impressed Mill that, with a frankness as rare as it was characteristic, he publicly accepted Thornton's position. Later economists—notably Walker, Sidgwick, and Professor Marshall—demolished whatever of substance was left in the theory after Thornton had riddled it. Among great living economists the theory, as originally set forth, has not now a defender.

I have dwelt, perhaps somewhat tediously, upon these points because they indicate the economic weapons with which workmen's combinations were commonly attacked when I began my Secretaryship of the Miners' Association. Not that the miners or working men generally cared

THE POLITICAL ECONOMISTS

much, if at all, for what political economists thought. In my opinion, indeed, they cared too little. Political economy cannot be wisely ignored by the trade-unionist. Speaking generally, the workman of those days regarded the political economist as a friend of the capitalist and an enemy of the labourer. How unjust was that view is clear from the citations already made from Adam Smith and J. S. Mill—citations which might be multiplied from the writings of Professor Marshall and other authorities.

If I may venture an opinion of my own, I should say that the earlier economists erred more frequently by their omissions than even by their unfounded assumptions and their positive declarations. One grave mistake was that in their reasonings they set up an imaginary man, forgetting for the moment that the human being is infinitely complex, and that he must be looked at as a whole to obtain a true view of his character and qualities. The nobler side of man's nature—his moral, intellectual, emotional faculties—were swept aside as irrelevant, and only his more sordid qualities were taken into account. That view does but scant justice even to the Stock Exchange speculator. Certainly it cannot be truthfully said of man universally that he is always and everywhere a greedy disciple of "Mammon, the least erected spirit that fell."

CHAPTER XV

THE HISTORY OF A DECADE

Ten Years of Stress and Struggle—Employers' Bitter Hostility to Trade Unions—Petty Tyrannies and Discontent—The Growth of the Union—Momentous Change in the Attitude of the Coalowners—Removal to Newcastle—The New Offices—John Nixon—Important Contribution to the *Shipping World*.

MEANWHILE MY HANDS were full of business connected with the Miners' Association. The first ten years of the Union—from the beginning of 1863 to the end of 1872—were years of stress, struggle, and turmoil. Trade unions have been, not inaptly, described as the "standing armies of labour." Rest they had none. Their wars were more incessant than were those of the armies of nations. Though a lover of peace, I was prepared to accept conflict as the normal law of trade-union existence. Yet from the beginning, and always, I strove to raise the battle-ground from force, in the shape of a strike or a lock-out, to the higher plane of an appeal to reason and argument. That, however, involved a moral and an educational problem which concerned the employer quite as much as the employed. In truth, the employers, in those days, were more backward pupils than the workmen. Almost without exception, though strongly combined themselves, they were bitterly hostile to the workmen's unions. Not only did they refuse to meet and negotiate with the men's representative, but they did all in their power to crush and destroy the unions.

THE HISTORY OF A DECADE

From 1865 to the early 'seventies, every meeting of a miners' committee afforded but too much evidence of the restlessness of the workmen and of the petty tyranny of some of the colliery managers. Manifold and grave were the grievances of the miners, and even the less serious of the grievances were exceedingly irritating and vexatious. To enumerate all the matters of complaint would be tedious and futile. The worst of them came under two heads—namely, the wholesale dismissal of men who took an active part in the affairs of the Union, and claims for a more adequate wage. The victimizing of the leaders was not general, but was mainly confined to about half-a-dozen collieries, though among these were some of the largest in the county. At one big colliery every man who was chosen as secretary or treasurer was forthwith dismissed from his employment. Ultimately the miners were driven to select as their officials persons who had left pit-work for some other occupation. Wages at this period were exceedingly low. The highest paid of the workmen, the coal-hewers, in 1865–66 did not average more than about 4s. a day, taking the county as a whole. As a measure of self-defence for the Association, the Committee passed a resolution to the effect that no colliery would be allowed to give notice for an advance at which the coal-hewers' average wage was 4s. a day or above that amount. That was in 1865–66. A few years later the amount was successively increased to 5s. and then to 6s., thus showing that the standard wage was gradually rising. Numerous appeals from the lodges came before the Committee at every meeting for permission to give notice to terminate agreements because of one grievance or another. Few of these applications were granted. To give notice would, as a rule, have resulted in a strike; and with a newly formed Union, weak in membership and without funds, strikes would

THOMAS BURT

inevitably have brought swift disruption and disaster to the Society.

Amid all this internal stress and agitation the Union grew in numbers and strengthened in cohesion. I continued, as I had begun, to address meetings at the Union collieries on four nights every week, from Monday to Thursday, and I often spoke on temperance, politics, and education on other nights, besides acting as a sort of missionary in visiting non-union collieries, to bring them into the Union fold. When the organization began, every colliery west of Newcastle, where many thousands were employed, stood aloof, as has been said. Soon, one after another joined the Association, until, by the end of 1873, the membership had increased to some nineteen thousand, and the general fund had reached £20,000. Except a few land-sale collieries on the outskirts of the county, all had now become affiliated with the Union, though at a few places individual miners remained outside. Personally, I then, and always, trusted to persuasion and argument in my appeals to the non-unionists, and, in practice, I found this more effective in consolidating the Union than would have been the compulsory measures which were favoured by some of my friends.

At the time of the Cramlington strike, and for some six or seven years afterwards, the employers rigidly adhered to their refusal to recognize the men's Union or to receive their representatives in conference; but in the early 'seventies wiser counsels prevailed, and from that time onward, whatever were the vicissitudes of trade, and however acute might be the differences between employers and employed, there was always an open way to the headquarters of the Coalowners' Association. This meant a great and beneficent transformation. Thenceforth local strikes, which had been of frequent occurrence, practically came to an end; there was no more victimiza-

198

THE HISTORY OF A DECADE

tion of men merely for taking an active part in Union affairs, nor were there any more evictions of miners from their homes when strikes broke out or when other serious differences with the employers arose.

At the beginning, and for the first six or seven years, the Union possessed no office. The secretarial work and interviews on Union business had to be managed at my house. We had but two rooms, a kitchen and a bedroom, and the latter did duty as the office. Three or four years after my election to the Secretaryship we removed into a house with four rooms, one of which was set apart as an office, the Association paying the extra rent. This continued until 1872. With the extension of the Union—which now, as I have said, embraced all the collieries west of Newcastle—that town became a more central place for the transaction of our business. Consequently the Association determined to remove to Newcastle, which henceforth was our headquarters. To find suitable premises for the office and for our household was not an easy task. At length we found a small office, up a long flight of stairs, in a central part of the town, overlooking Grey's Monument. As our family was increasing, more house accommodation was required, and houses of a medium kind, suited to our needs and means, were then scarce and dear in the town. After much searching, we secured a suitable house at an annual rental of £26. As the rental at Blyth was about a fourth of that sum, the increase was somewhat serious. Trade, however, had improved, the wages of the miners had risen considerably, the Union was flourishing, and from time to time my salary had been increased from 27s. 6d. to £2 10s. a week. Without undue risk we could, therefore, face the additional outlay.

In 1873 the Union purchased house property in Newcastle which afforded an office and a committee-room for

THOMAS BURT

the use of the Society and two dwelling-houses. I may say that, for fifteen years, the office was a portion of the house in which we lived—not quite an ideal arrangement for family life! Yet with the many and diverse visitors who came and went on business we always had the pleasantest relations. No one ever came who was under the influence of drink, nor did we ever hear a vulgar or offensive word. It would be superfluous to mention this were there not a notion abroad in certain quarters that miners are a somewhat rough and ill-mannered part of the community.

The rapid growth of the Union, and the consequent increase of secretarial and other work, necessitated another change. Up to the middle of 1872 the whole management of the Society had been left almost entirely in my hands, the other officials, the President and Treasurer, continuing to follow their ordinary work, and receiving payment only when attending committee or delegate meetings. Mr. John Nixon was elected to the Assistant-Secretaryship. No selection could have been more agreeable to me. As was usual with pit-boys in the days of his youth, Mr. Nixon had commenced work underground at a very tender age. His educational outfit—scanty enough—was such as was common to the children of miners in the days of his boyhood. When appointed Assistant-Secretary, Mr. Nixon was President of the Union, and was working as check-weighman at West Moor Colliery. He was a man of high character, of exceptional intelligence, of sound judgment, of moderate views, and of a most conciliatory disposition; yet, withal, he was a stout, resolute, courageous fighter for what he thought was right. Whenever, as Secretary, I had encountered perplexing difficulties in conducting the affairs of the Association—and these often presented themselves—I hied me off to West Moor for consultation and counsel with him. Seldom

200

THE HISTORY OF A DECADE

did we differ in opinion, and other differences we had none.

With a view to giving a consecutive record of the efforts put forth by the Miners' Union to establish a more rational system of settling industrial differences, it may be permissible for me to depart from a strictly chronological order of narration, and to travel beyond the period with which I am now dealing. I may further take the liberty of quoting from myself. Some years ago Major Evan Rowland Jones, editor of the *Shipping World*, published in that paper a series of articles on "Industrial Harmony : How Attained." He applied to three large and well-known employers of labour and to three trade-union leaders to give their views and the result of their experience. In response to Major Jones—an old and highly esteemed friend of mine—I wrote him a long letter, and from that letter I cite a few paragraphs. It is important for those who are interested in the subject to note the date when the articles were published, which was in the early months of 1908.

"Fifty years ago," I wrote, "there was no Union among the miners of Northumberland. There was then much bitterness and ill-feeling between the miners and the colliery proprietors, and strikes were of very frequent occurrence. The notion then was very common, and often expressed in newspapers, that trade unions and strikes were synonymous terms. Seldom nowadays do we hear such utterances. The present Miners' Union has, indeed, played a great part in bringing about the better industrial relations which now prevail. . . .

"Among the greatest of our achievements in Northumberland (and much of what is said of Northumberland is equally applicable to the larger mining county of Durham) are the Joint Committee and the Conciliation Board. The Joint Committee discusses and settles all

THOMAS BURT

local sectional differences relating to 'wages, practices of working, or any other subject which may arise from time to time at any particular colliery and which shall be referred to the consideration of the Committee by the persons concerned.' County questions or questions affecting the general trade are outside the province of the Joint Committee. This Committee consists of six representatives chosen by the Miners' Union and six chosen by the Mineowners' Association.

"The Conciliation Board deals with and settles general wage questions. It is a larger body than the Joint Committee, having fifteen representatives on either side. Both have an independent chairman—that is, a chairman who is neither a workman, nor a colliery proprietor, nor in any way connected with one or the other.

"The Joint Committee has had a long experience, having been in existence since 1872. The life of the Conciliation Board has been shorter and less stable. First established in 1894, on our initiative, the Board was terminated by notice from the workmen at the end of 1896. The Board was re-established in January, 1900, and is still in existence. During the interval of some four years, when the Board was non-existent, wages were still arranged amicably by negotiation. No great friction was then experienced; certainly no strike occurred during that period.

"Speaking generally, both the Conciliation Board and the Joint Committee have worked admirably and produced very good results. That, I do not doubt, would be the general testimony alike of employers and workmen. Not that both parties have always been pleased with the decisions. Far from it. At one time or another employers or workmen have been intensely dissatisfied. But that is not, of course, a condemnation of the system. Can human wit devise a method that will wholly reconcile conflicting interests, and that will never fail to satisfy

202

THE HISTORY OF A DECADE

everybody ? To ask such a question is to answer it. All that can fairly and reasonably be expected has been given by our Conciliation Board and our Joint Committee.

“The details, the machinery, of the boards may from time to time be modified and improved, but in principle and in essence I believe they will continue until they are superseded by something better and more enduring. So long as the present industrial system exists—until it is replaced, as I hope it may be one day, by some form of co-partnership or co-operation—I do not myself think we can have anything fairer than boards such as I have described.

“Before the Conciliation Board period we had tried arbitration and sliding scales for the adjustment of general wages. In 1875 to 1876 there were no fewer than five such references to arbitration, four of them on wage disputes. As umpires we were fortunate enough to obtain the services of some very eminent, capable men, including Mr. (afterwards Sir Rupert) Kettle, Dr. Lyon Playfair, M.P., and Sir Farrar Herschell, afterwards Lord Chancellor. All these arbitrations took place in a time of extreme trade depression, when prices were falling, and when reductions of wage were demanded by the employers and awarded by the umpires. The method was slow and cumbrous, but it was of great educational value, and, whatever its demerits, it was certainly preferable to a strike or a lockout.

“From 1879 to 1887 the general wages of the North-umbrian miners were regulated by sliding-scales based on the selling-price of coal. These scales were modified from time to time, and they were occasionally suspended by the action of one side or the other, but they were almost continuously in operation over the eight years named. I had myself, from the beginning of my Secretaryship, strongly advocated conciliation and arbitration,

THOMAS BURT

and later I had supported the sliding-scale system, not because I regarded these schemes as ideally perfect, but because they were steps towards a more rational method of adjusting wages. We were somewhat laboriously and stumbingly groping our way. These early attempts were partly tentative and experimental. They gave us a large body of facts and experience which have proved of permanent value. They did much more. They laid the foundation and paved the way for the more orderly, systematic, and altogether superior method of adjusting differences by means of the Conciliation Board.

“Our arbitrations, and for the most part our sliding-scales too, were fated to be in operation during an extremely critical period of trade depression, and, however partial their success, they carried us over the crisis with less friction and with smaller reductions of wage than took place in almost any other mining district.

“To the credit of our men I am glad to say that in all our history and throughout our whole negotiations, whether the medium was an Arbitration Court, a Wages Committee, or a Conciliation Board, the miners invariably accepted and carried out their agreements. In all our general wage reductions, by the methods named, never was a single pit stopped a day or an hour in resisting the award, however distasteful or however hateful the result might be.

“There were, indeed, instances in which individual collieries rebelled against the decision of the Joint Committee. These, however, were so few—probably not amounting to one per thousand of the total cases settled—that, except for the sake of strict accuracy and the value of the lesson conveyed, they scarcely deserve to be mentioned. When a colliery of men thus refused to abide by the decision of the Joint Committee, they were dealt

THE HISTORY OF A DECADE

with patiently, but firmly, and, if necessary, very sternly. The agents of the Union visited the men in meeting assembled, and tried what advice and persuasion would do. If that failed, and resistance proved stubborn, not only was financial support withheld, but the general Union never hesitated to dismember the recalcitrant lodge. These collieries soon applied for re-admission, and after an interval for penitence and purgation they paid up their arrears and again became members of the Association. A salutary experience of this kind never needed to be repeated. Such discipline is only possible, however, when the officials and committee have the cordial support of the membership generally, and that support was never withheld. The employers, too, always insisted upon their members carrying out the Joint Committee's decisions. Thus confidence was maintained.

“ Since the Union began, some forty-six years ago, we have had but two general strikes, the first in 1879, of about nine weeks' duration, the second in 1887, a stubborn fight of seventeen weeks. On both occasions the miners offered arbitration. Happily, it is twenty-one years since we had any conflict of the kind. For thirty-five years we have scarcely had any local or sectional strikes. Those which have occurred have nearly always been at collieries outside the Coalowners' Association, where the machinery of the Joint Committee was not available. As a rule the stoppage in these cases was only for a few days.

“ I am not sanguine enough to imagine that we have seen the last of our strikes, though I fervently hope that I shall never myself again witness or take part in these irrational, wasteful conflicts. The fighting spirit, however, is strong and ineradicable in man, and when that spirit is once thoroughly roused, reason, judgment, and common-sense are for the time being in abeyance.

“ The Miners' Eight Hours Bill, which in one form or

THOMAS BURT

another is bound to come soon, will doubtless raise difficulties. Tact, patience, self-sacrifice (not on one side only), and a readiness to give and take, these qualities, will be needed to readjust things to the altered conditions. I am hopeful that these qualities, which have been possessed and exercised in the past, will not be wanting in the coming time. Whatever the future may have in store, we have certainly made immense strides forward, and I feel assured that we shall never go back to the turmoil, strife, and chaos of bygone days.

“ This letter, which is much longer than I had intended, and much less methodical than I had desired, must now be concluded. The story, though hastily, and I fear somewhat crudely, told, is not without encouragement to those who are striving to secure industrial harmony. It will be seen that many of the battles which are being fought to-day in other countries, and sometimes even in our own land, were fought and won more than a generation ago by the Northumberland miners. They successfully asserted the right of free combination.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION

Entrance on Political Life—How the Miners Won the Franchise—In the Field as a Candidate—Energetic Helpers—The Two Trotters—Thomas Glassey—Robert Elliott—Andrew Fairbairn—Whigs and Radicals—First Address as Candidate—An Admirable Political Opponent—Opposing Candidates at the Same Meetings—Major Duncan and the Miners—Polling-Day Scenes.

IN THE LAST CHAPTER I somewhat anticipated some of the events which had occurred, so I must now retrace my steps and introduce a new topic. In February, 1874, I was elected to Parliament as member for Morpeth. The election was certainly remarkable, in some respects unique. But it has been well described in the sketches of my life written by Mr. Aaron Watson and Mr. T. C. Meech, and I need not repeat in detail what they have said.

To understand the local situation it is necessary to distinguish between the Parliamentary division and the town which has given its name to the constituency. Morpeth is an old Parliamentary borough, which has been represented in the House of Commons for some hundreds of years. From the time of Edward VI to the passing of the first Reform Bill it sent two members to Parliament. Always a small town, the electors in those pre-Reform days did not exceed a hundred. By the Reform Act of 1868 the boundaries of the Parliamentary borough were largely extended, the extension including the growing town of Blyth, some ten miles from Morpeth, and the whole of the intervening district. At the time of

THOMAS BURT

my election the population of Morpeth was about five thousand and that of the Parliamentary borough a little over thirty thousand. The extension brought within the Parliamentary area many large collieries, and yet, up to 1873, not more than two or three hundred miners were invested with voting power.

For many generations, probably from the beginning of the Northumberland coal-trade, the custom had been for the married workmen to live in the colliery houses rent free, the house being regarded as part of the miner's wage. The colliery proprietors, who owned the cottages, paid the rates in a lump sum. Hence the vast majority of the miners were voteless. It was contended that these householders were in a position analogous to that of the compound-householder in the towns, and that they were therefore entitled to have their names placed on the Parliamentary register. How to get over this preliminary difficulty—that was the problem. With their usual resourcefulness, the miners started a Franchise Association, with the declared twofold object of gaining votes and of sending the miners' Secretary (myself) to the House of Commons.

After a somewhat prolonged and vigorous agitation the franchise was won. The revising barrister at first declined to allow the miners who did not themselves pay rates to be placed on the register, but ultimately he decided in their favour. The electorate was thus increased at a bound from two thousand two hundred and sixty to nearly five thousand; the miners then constituting nearly half of the total electors.

The chief leaders in the franchise movement and in the election which speedily followed their victory were Thomas Glassey, Robert Elliott, Andrew Fairbairn, Dr. James Trotter, and his brother, Dr. Robert Trotter. Of them I shall have something to say later.

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION

Meanwhile a requisition asking me to become a candidate at the forthcoming General Election was being extensively signed in the Parliamentary borough. On a bright October Saturday afternoon in 1873 an open-air meeting was held at Bedlington Cross, when the requisition was presented to me. One of the most popular men in the North of England, Mr. Joseph Cowen (shortly afterwards elected M.P. for Newcastle-upon-Tyne), presided on the occasion. Mr. Robert Elliott presented the requisition, and the meeting was addressed by Mr. Glassey, Dr. James Trotter, Dr. J. H. Rutherford, of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and others. The meeting was large, enthusiastic, and unanimous. The requisition, signed by some three thousand householders—in other words, by quite three-fifths of the total electors who were then on the register—could not be ignored. Speaking in reply, I declared that, in response to their appeal, I placed myself at their disposal, and that “on behalf of Labour and Radical politics I was prepared to contest the seat against all comers.” The way was made smoother for me by the announcement, on the same day, that the distinguished sitting member, Sir George Grey, owing to advancing age, would not be a candidate at the General Election.

Up to that time, although I had helped the franchise movement, I could not truly be said to have been a candidate. The first intimation I had of any personal connection with the representation of Morpeth was to read newspaper reports stating that the collieries in the borough were, one after another, holding meetings, and were passing unanimous resolutions to the effect that I was a fit and proper person to represent them in the House of Commons.

Heretofore I had in no way been consulted, but shortly afterwards a small deputation from the Franchise Association, consisting of Dr. James Trotter, Mr. Glassey, and Mr. A. Fairbairn, waited upon me at my home. Their errand

THOMAS BURT

was to tell me that there was among the miners a strong and general desire that I should be put forward as their candidate at the General Election. What did I think of the proposal? My first impulse was to laugh, but a sense of good manners restrained me, and I confined myself to a friendly smile. Truly, in my wildest dreams, the idea of becoming a member of Parliament had never entered my mind. I remember that I quoted from *Titus Andronicus* the lines :

O ! brothers, speak with possibilities,
And do not break into these deep extremes.

Without committing myself to anything, I then put a question to them. Did they not think that the first step was to carry to a successful issue the agitation which they had so vigorously begun, and, when they had secured votes for the miners, to then consider how the votes should be used, and who should be the candidate? The reply was that to place in the foreground a well-known candidate was the very best way to achieve the first object of the Franchise Association.

After my declaration at Bedlington I was now fairly launched on the somewhat troubled sea of political life, and I forthwith proceeded to address meetings in every part of the borough. Effective help was not wanting. The leading spirits throughout the election contest, some of whose names I have already given, formed a remarkable group. They were busy men, hard workers in their respective spheres, and they devoted their nights—the only time available—to addressing meetings throughout the somewhat scattered constituency. T. Glassey, R. Elliott, and A. Fairbairn were working miners, and the other two, Dr. James and Dr. Robert Trotter, were medical men with a large and rather exacting practice in the populous mining district in and around Bedlington and Choppington. All of them were good public speakers, while Robert

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION

Elliott and the Trotters were ready, clever versifiers. Mr. Glassey, full of ideas, initiative, and resource, was a born leader. Mr. Fairbairn was as wise in council as he was resolute in action. If, at any time, the prolonged agitation flagged, which seldom happened, the poets plied their songs, ballads, and squibs to keep the fire blazing. Two of their productions had great vogue, and created something of a sensation. These were R. Elliott's "Pitman Gan' te Parliament" and "The Morpeth Hubbubboo." The former reached some twenty editions, and was circulated in thousands. Written in the Northumbrian dialect, it won immense popularity in the counties of Northumberland and Durham. The "Hubbubboo" was anonymous, and was generally attributed to Dr. James Trotter; but Mr. Elliott, who was likely to know, said that Dr. Robert Trotter was the author. It was, or professed to be, a fierce attack upon every person prominently connected with the election. The candidate and his chief supporters—Glassey, Elliott, and the Trotters—were scathingly lampooned. The "Hubbubboo" was certainly clever, and beyond doubt it was intended to help the election, though most people at the time took it too seriously. In Morpeth there was great indignation, many of the innocent inhabitants imagining that they would be suspected to have written the diatribe.

As a specimen of the "Hubbubboo" I give a single stanza, and, to avoid hurting anyone's tender feelings, I shall quote a few lines relating to the then candidate :

Nine groans for Burt the Howky,¹
And if he ventures here,
His dry teetotal carcase
We'll soak in Robberts' beer.
We'll put him in the stocks, too,
And pelt him well with eggs;
We'll black his howky eyes, boys,
And kick his bandy legs.

"Howky" is colloquial for "miner."

THOMAS BURT

He would unseat Sir Georgy ;
He would be member too.
We'll hunt him out of Morpeth,
And spoil his Hubbubboo.

Of the group mentioned, Dr. Robert and Dr. James Trotter died many years ago. They were gifted men of a fine type. In appearance James reminded me of portraits of Burns which I had seen, and the doctor had some of his great countryman's gifts and characteristics. Piquant verse flowed from his pen without effort, and, when at his best, he spoke with eloquence and oratorical effect. His habits were temperate. Generous to a fault and over-confiding, he was ever ready, out of his moderate means, to help the unfortunate, and he too often fell a victim to beggars and impostors. A monument to his memory, raised by public subscription, stands in a prominent position at the top of Bedlington town.

The Hon. T. Glassey long ago emigrated to Queensland. His ability, energy, and public spirit soon enabled him to win a seat in the Queensland Legislative Assembly, and he was afterwards elected a senator of the first Commonwealth Parliament in his adopted country. Mr. R. Elliott removed from Choppington to Gateshead. For many years he was a member of the Town Council, and afterwards an alderman and a magistrate, and did much useful work among his neighbours.

Mr. A. Fairbairn ended his days at Bedlington. Honoured by all who knew him, he was for many years a member of the District Council and of the Northumberland County Council. Of the latter he was also an alderman, and was made a county magistrate.

It has been publicly stated more than once that the Liberal party stood aloof from my candidature, and that they were, indeed, more or less hostile. That was not so. I was agreeably surprised that so many of the

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION

chief tradesmen of Morpeth, Bedlington, and Blyth joined my election committee and took an active part in my election campaign. True, a few of those who had been prominent supporters of Sir George Grey viewed with some coldness and misgiving the advent of the new candidate. Nor was that astonishing. Their attitude was attributed to snobbishness, and perhaps that unamiable quality was operative in some instances; but the snobs, if they may be so called, were not wholly without excuse. Morpeth had always been represented by a member of aristocratic lineage. Two of my predecessors—Sir George Grey, and before him the Hon. Leveson-Gower, afterwards known as Lord Granville—were, not only conventionally, but in the noblest sense, aristos of the best. For these distinguished statesmen to be followed by a man whose origin was unknown, and who, “too proud to care from whence he came,” was unabashed at his obscure birth—by a man who was landless, who lived in a cottage of which he was not the owner—this surely was a great fall, if not a degradation, to the historic borough of Morpeth.

Outside the ranks of the miners, what little was known of me was not likely to commend me to the favour of those of the middle-class who could forgive youth and inexperience in a candidate when this rawness was accompanied by riches, but who regarded poverty as a mortal sin. I had recently left the coal-pits to undertake the duties of Secretary of the Miners' Union, and this at a time when trade unions were hated and despised by what were called the respectable orders of society. Class prejudice to some small extent undoubtedly existed, and there were also sharp differences of political opinion between the new voters and the less advanced of the old Liberals. Heretofore Morpeth had been regarded as a Whig seat. Among my Radical friends there was a strong prejudice against the Whigs, which I certainly did

THOMAS BURT

not share. On the contrary, I held the great Whig families in high estimation. They were the Reformers of their day, and they fought bravely and disinterestedly for the liberties and for the political enfranchisement of the people when those without votes had few friends and helpers among the rich and powerful. In the Greys and the Lambtons Northumberland and Durham afforded splendid examples of Whig noblemen who had for generations championed the claims of the poor and the political outcasts when these were voteless and voiceless, politically, in the land of their birth. Yet while this was true, and was not always remembered with sufficient gratitude, it was equally true that there were acute differences in outlook and in opinion between the Whigs and the Radicals.

Hence the more tepid Liberals must have been somewhat startled when they read my first political address. To mention only a few of the items on which I laid stress, there was on its forefront a strong declaration in favour of Home Rule for Ireland. Then followed, among other mild proposals, the abolition of the Game Laws; reform of land tenure; a drastic change in the laws bearing upon trade unions and labour; and the disestablishment of the Church in England and Wales. Even some of those who might feel inclined to travel in my direction were not without excuse if they hesitated to join in the galloping, breakneck pace which I had set.

Let it be borne in mind that this was nearly fifty years ago. Yet I was certainly not too Radical for the constituency. The new electors not only nearly doubled the number of voters, but they brought a great accession of enthusiastic Radicalism into the Parliamentary borough. They were not, as they were sometimes said to be by those who did not know them, entirely raw, ignorant novices in the rights and duties of citizenship, but, Radicals almost to a man, they had for many years taken a keen,

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION

intelligent interest in the leading political questions of the day.

The dissolution of Mr. Gladstone's Parliament of 1868-74 was announced somewhat suddenly and unexpectedly on January 26, 1874. That Parliament did splendid work, but for quite a year before its end it had become clear, alike from internal and external evidence, alike from Liberal dissensions in the House of Commons and from the loss of seats at successive by-elections, that it was tottering to its fall. The interval between the dissolution and the polling-day was short, but we were ready for the fray. My name had been before the constituency for nearly two years, and after my acceptance of the requisition at Bedlington I had addressed numerous meetings in every part of the Parliamentary division.

So far as I could prevent it, I was resolved that no elector should vote for me in ignorance of my political opinions. Having entered upon the contest, I did all I could to achieve success. One thing only that my enthusiastic supporters suggested I declined to do : I refused to canvass for votes, believing, as I did then and always, that canvassing was inconsistent with the Ballot Act.

During the election many questions were, of course, put to me. To the best of my ability I answered all of them that bore upon politics with frankness and fulness. One inquirer, however—one only—was tempted to make an excursion into the region of theology. In a somewhat acrid, peremptory tone he demanded to know whether the candidate believed in the doctrine of the Trinity and in the inspiration of the Bible—"yes or no?" My answer was less categorical than the question, but I hope it was quite as civil and as relevant. As reported at the time, the reply was as follows : "As I am not a candidate for a professorship of theology or the occupancy of a pulpit, I decline to say whether I do or do not believe in

THOMAS BURT

the doctrines mentioned. The question is entirely foreign to the business before us. The contest in which we are engaged is a political, not a religious, contest. I maintain that the constituency has no right whatever to institute an inquisition into the faith or creed of any candidate who may solicit its suffrages. For this reason I refuse to answer all questions of a theological nature that may here or elsewhere be put to me."

The Conservatives lost no time in selecting their candidate. Their choice fell upon Major Duncan, R.A., of Woolwich. A finer man and a better candidate could not have been chosen. Rumours were abroad that there were to be three candidates—a Tory, an orthodox Liberal, and a Labour-Radical. One gentleman who was called a Gladstonian Liberal actually came upon the scene to view the political battlefield. The reconnaissance did not seem to afford an inspiring prospect of success, and he quickly returned to his home. A Morpeth resident of some influence, who had tried to secure an additional candidate, paid me a friendly visit. He was both cordial and frank. He told me that he had done all he could to procure a Gladstonian, but the candidate he had expected to obtain came, after inquiry, to the conclusion that there was no chance of success. My interviewer was evidently disappointed. I administered whatever comfort I could. "What you mean by a Gladstonian I do not quite know ; but if admiration of Mr. Gladstone, and a strong inclination to support him to the utmost, constitute a Gladstonian, I do not think you need give yourself further trouble. True, I shall not pledge myself in advance to follow any man, but there is no statesman alive that I am so likely to follow as Mr. Gladstone." That, or something to that purport, is what I said. After my first election my interviewer became one of my stanchest supporters, though I do not think he ever agreed with all my opinions and votes.

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION

The actual contest was short and sweet, though sweetness, unhappily, cannot always be predicated of political elections. Major Duncan, as genial and amiable as he was brave, made troops of friends, including among them his political opponent. No personalities, no offensive words, were uttered by either side. The audiences, too, were, without exception, orderly and well-behaved. A few meetings were addressed by both candidates from the same rostrum. This running in double-harness, so to speak, began almost on the first day. Addressing a large meeting of my own in the market-place at Morpeth, I observed my gallant opponent standing on the outskirts of the crowd. When I ended my speech, I invited him to mount our extemporized platform, to reply to me if he liked, and to set forth his own views on the political situation. Promptly responding, he was accorded a hearty welcome, and delivered a good Tory speech.

From the Major and others I heard amusing accounts of his meetings at some of the colliery villages. The audiences listened attentively to him and to his supporters, cheering whenever they approved of what was said, and at the conclusion of the meeting a vote of thanks to the candidate for his "interesting lecture" was duly moved, seconded, and carried by acclamation. "The miners," declared the Major, "are exceedingly kind; they will give me anything except what I most strongly desire—their votes."

At Choppington Colliery, where I had lived and worked for nearly five years, a most extraordinary meeting was held. The Major was accompanied by Sir Matthew White Ridley, grandfather of the present Lord Ridley, who presided, by Lieut. Mitford, and other influential friends. As usual, the Major was accorded a cordial welcome and a capital hearing. He was startled, however, almost horrified, at some of the questions that were put

THOMAS BURT

to him. "Did the gallant gentleman not think that the time had come when the Army and Navy could be safely abolished, and when all international differences could be left to arbitration?" "What about Republicanism? Would it not be much better to establish a Republic in this country in place of the present effete and expensive system of government?" These were some of the milder suggestions put forward in various parts of the hall. Dr. James Trotter, I was told, prepared most of the questions, and placed them in the hands of voters who were likely to do justice to them. Like all the Trotters, James was something of a wag, and it was not always safe to take him too seriously.

Though the Major had a keen sense of humour, he did not know his questioners and his audience well enough to answer by banter and ridicule, even had he been in a mood so to answer. He gravely admonished them to beware of these dangerous, treasonable opinions, and solemnly declared that nothing would ever induce him to countenance or support such abominable doctrines. Lieut. Mitford, whom I casually met the day after the Choppington incident, remarked: "Well, Mr. Burt, we were out at your place last night, and a capital meeting we had—crowded, orderly, enthusiastic, unanimous—for you."

The polling-day was a great event, not only exciting, but novel. Probably there was not an elector who had ever before given a Parliamentary vote. In Morpeth town, when it was regarded as a pocket borough, the oldest inhabitant did not remember to have witnessed a political contest. Throughout the constituency every pit was laid idle for the day. That, indeed, was necessary, if the miners were to have the opportunity of voting, since the polling-hours were then between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. The polling-booths were too few and far between. Whole collieries of men had to travel quite six miles to and fro between their homes and the voting-places. But with them

THE FAMOUS MORPETH ELECTION

personal convenience did not count. From Cambois, West Sleekburn, and other distant places, the pit-men marched in procession, sometimes with their bands and banners, to Bedlington, where they recorded their votes.

The scene at Bedlington was memorable and unprecedented. It has been graphically described by my friend, the late W. E. Adams, an able journalist who was present at the time. From his interesting reminiscences, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, I cite a few sentences: "Mr. Burt's tour was a triumphal procession. The arrival of the candidate and his friends at Bedlington led to an extraordinary scene. The main street of the town was crowded, for, of course, the pits were all idle. First there was much cheering; then arose an irrepressible desire to do something unusual. The horses were taken out of the conveyance, dozens of stalwart miners seized the shafts, and the electoral party was rushed up and down the thoroughfare at a furious and hazardous pace, amidst the wildest excitement. It was even proposed to run the carriage all the way to Morpeth; nor was it without some difficulty that the jubilant crowd was dissuaded from its purpose. Not less astonishing was the reception accorded to Mr. Burt at Morpeth itself, where both candidates—such was the friendly character of the contest—addressed the multitude, which literally filled the market-place, from the same platform and from the windows of each other's committee-rooms!"

When the ballot-boxes revealed their secret, the figures were found to be:—

BURT	..	..	..	..	3,332
DUNCAN	..	..	..	..	585

Evidently the great Conservative reaction had not yet reached Morpeth. On the side of the victors there was natural jubilation, and the vanquished accepted their defeat with equanimity and good-humour. Probably the result was not wholly unexpected.

CHAPTER XVII

RETURNED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Major Duncan in a Coal-Mine—The Major in a Miner's Cottage—Conservative Approval of the New Radical Member—Rival Banquets—A Defeated Conservative among Victorious Radicals—Graceful Election Souvenir

MAJOR DUNCAN had expressed a wish to see the underground workings of a coal-mine, and before his return home I arranged a visit to Cambois, then a comparatively new colliery. This, to my gallant opponent, was quite a novel experience. One of the leading colliery officials was kind enough to take charge of our little party, and I, as an old pit-man, accompanied the Major. The pit was in full work, and we saw something of the whole mining process. We first went to the ventilation furnace, and saw the old furnace-man trimming his big fire; we saw the trapper-boys as we went through their doors; we met the drivers and the pony-putters as they were hurrying towards the shaft with their coal-laden tubs; and finally we proceeded to the face of the workings, where we witnessed the hewers at their hard work, some of them plying the pick, others the shovel, while others, again, with hammer and drill were preparing to dislodge the coal by explosives. The Major chatted freely with many of the men and boys, and was evidently highly pleased with all that he witnessed.

Here and there were signs and echoes of the election

220

RETURNED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

contest which had just concluded. The drivers, putters, and trappers cheered us as we travelled to and fro along the roadways. The furnace-man had chalked in large characters on the wall the words, "Vote for Burt"; the trapper-boys had written on their doors the same exhortation; two new horses had been taken into the pit the day before our visit, and, as an indication of goodwill to both candidates, one was called Duncan and the other Burt. How these quadrupeds behaved themselves I never learnt; perhaps, politician-like, they sometimes jibbed and kicked over the traces.

Of Cambois Colliery the Major told me an election story which had given him some amusement. In canvassing there he entered a miner's cottage and saw the householder sitting at his dinner—black, just as he had come out of the pit. This, indeed, was nothing unusual, since, after a hard day's work at the coal-face, the great need of the miner is to feed well. With his gentlemanly instinct, the Major was about to retire with apologies for his unseasonable intrusion. "Come in, sir," cried the unwashed diner, "it's all reet." Thus reassured, the visitor explained that he was the Conservative candidate, and he had called to solicit the miner's vote. There was a brief pause; then came the answer, short and definite: "No, sir, sorry I cannot vote for you. I'm gan to vote for Mr. Bort, but ye're quite welcome to a share o' me pot-pie." This friendly offer was declined with thanks. Meanwhile the pitman's wife, arms akimbo, standing on the floor, with a somewhat stern visage, said: "Aw thowt Jack was gan to be soft there, and was aboot to promise ye his vote. If he had, it wad hev been warse for him. Canny man," she continued, "if ye had look't at the bed ye wad hev seen that there wes ne chance of a vote here. There's a new twilt that I've just myed in Mr. Bort's colours." "Sure enough," said the Major, "when

THOMAS BURT

I looked I saw a fine new green-and-white quilt on the bed. What chance could anyone have in a contest with you when men, women, boys, and girls were working for you both above and below ground ? ”

Shortly after the declaration of the poll two banquets were held at Morpeth. The first was a dinner given to Major Duncan by his supporters, as a tribute to his worth and to show appreciation of the way he had fought the election. The object of the second was to celebrate my return as member for the division. To further illustrate the temper which prevailed, after as during the contest, a few paragraphs may be devoted to the proceedings.

The dinner to Major Duncan was presided over by Major Mitford, of Mitford Hall, Morpeth ; and the gallant chairman was supported by a large array of clergymen, squires, and representative men from every part of the constituency. The chairman—a tall, stately, elderly gentleman, a fine combination of the military officer and the country squire—in proposing the health of Major Duncan, delivered a racy, piquant speech, garnished by not a few expletives such as are seldom heard in public assemblies. Speaking of the guest of the evening, he was highly, and justly, eulogistic. By way of comforting the defeated candidate, the chairman declared that “ no man living could have won the seat when pitted against Mr. Burt. He could tell them this, that he was satisfied that if Mr. John Bright himself had contested the borough of Morpeth he would have been utterly damned.” (Cheers). “ Perhaps he was going on too long for them.” (Cries of “ No, no ! go on ! ”) “ Well, then, he repeated that if John Bright had come there, and not only offered to the constituents of the extended borough of Morpeth a cheap breakfast-table, but if he had offered a breakfast-table gratis, they would have seen him damned before they would have voted for him.”

RETURNED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

(Cheers). Referring to me, the chairman declared that I was "a born gentleman."

Nor, by the way, was this the first time he had given me such a testimonial. At the beginning of the contest, when speaking to a crowd from Major Duncan's committee-room window, I heard him say: "As for Mr. Burt, ladies and gentlemen"—then he paused for a moment, and I screwed myself up, expecting to hear a fierce verbal attack upon my life and character; I had at times been called some bad names (not by my political opponents, however), among them "a present-day Jack Cade," "an unscrupulous demagogue," and I wondered what Major Mitford was about to say of me—"as for Mr. Burt," repeated the Major, "all I have to say of him is that he is a born gentleman." I felt grateful to the venerable gentleman for thus fortifying me on my weakest side!

No unfriendly word was uttered at the dinner against the new member, his supporters, or against those who had so mistakenly recorded their votes on the wrong side! The assumption, however, implied or expressed, alike in the chairman's speech and in that of Major Duncan, was that the miners, who were nearly half of the total voters, were ignorant and inexperienced politically. and that in voting they had been wholly influenced by their attachment to an old friend and comrade. For instance, Major Duncan, in replying to the toast of his health, said the election had been one not of politics, but of sentiment. This was the first time many of the electors had exercised the franchise, and he might say they were in their political childhood. They had the faith and the sentiment of children, and in their allegiance to Mr. Burt they had all the loyalty of women. . . . Sentiment died away, however, as childhood died away. As their education and political knowledge

THOMAS BURT

increased the miners would begin to think for themselves, and they would not send a delegate, but a member, to Parliament. He had almost at times wished that his opponent had not been such an awfully good fellow. He abhorred his politics, but he liked him as a man. He could never associate him quite with the blazing doctrines to which he had seen his name attached. . . . He was confident that those who supported a man who advocated such extreme doctrines did not know what they were doing. As Tennyson said, they were like "children crying for the light," and they did not know what they were crying for.

Quickly following the dinner to Major Duncan came the banquet to celebrate my return as member for Morpeth. At this meeting there was a large representative attendance of both sexes—some three hundred sat down to the repast. Mr. Robert Elliott presided, and the speakers included Mr. Glassey, Dr. J. H. Rutherford, and other gentlemen. Instead of toasts there were two resolutions, one to congratulate me on my election, and the other to welcome Major Duncan and to express approval of "the courteous, gentlemanly bearing of our opponent during the late contest, and trusting that the example set by both parties will be largely followed elsewhere." Not the least notable feature in this extraordinary gathering was the presence of Major Duncan to join in the commemoration. To those who care for things sartorial it may be told that the Major was the only one in the meeting who had donned evening dress. Likely enough there were few, if any, in the large assemblage who had ever before even seen a person so habited. But the garb was of small consequence; the essential thing was that the man was there—that he had travelled more than three hundred miles, and would have to travel the same distance on his return journey, in order that he

RETURNED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

might be present at the celebration of his opponent's victory. Surely this was a generous, kindly act, probably without parallel in the history of political contests. Greatly and rightly was it highly appreciated by the new member and his supporters.

Of the speeches at the banquet little need be said, but it may be permissible for me to briefly summarize, from the newspaper reports of the day, a few points in my address and in that of Major Duncan, since they are of more than personal interest. On such an occasion I wished to be as uncontroversial as possible, but there were some of the utterances at the Major's dinner which I could not well ignore. It had been suggested that I would go to the House of Commons as a mere delegate. Referring to the statement that "at some future time Morpeth would send to Parliament a representative and not a delegate," I said: "I believe it is sending a representative now. I am not at all squeamish at having the term delegate applied to me, though I know well all the odium often attached to that word. But what is meant by the term? If it means that I shall always pay great heed to the views of my constituents, then I am prepared to go as a delegate, with that understanding. But if, after having given every attention to their opinions, should I find that I am in complete disagreement with them, it is meant that I shall advocate principles and opinions which I regard as mischievous and abhorrent, then I am not going as a delegate. My belief is that, if a member of Parliament finds that his views are entirely out of harmony with those of his constituents he either ought to resign or his constituents should get rid of him as soon as possible. Above everything, he should be true to himself, and should never advocate anything in which he does not wholly believe. Therefore, when I go to the House of Commons, you may depend upon it

THOMAS BURT

I shall always speak and act in accordance with my own honest convictions. They may be mistaken, but, so long as they are mine, I shall assert them."

In a lighter tone, and with a touch of banter, I vindicated my constituents from the implied charge of political inexperience and lack of judgment. I pointed out that the figures disclosed by the ballot-boxes clearly proved that, apart from the newly enfranchised electors, the old voters had given a substantial majority in my favour. The new voters, too, were keen, well-informed politicians. As to "children crying for the light," I gently rallied the Major on having quoted a single line when he should have given the whole verse :

So runs my dream ; but what am I ?
An infant crying in the night :
An infant crying for the light :
And with no language but a cry.

"It was a dream on the part of Tennyson—a splendid dream ; nevertheless it was but a dream. Well, ladies and gentlemen, it was not less a dream on the part of the gallant Major when he expressed his belief that the time was at hand when a Conservative politician would represent Morpeth in Parliament. Had our great Poet-Laureate been dealing with the politics of this constituency he would have felt that he was not like 'an infant crying in the night,' but like a giant singing at noonday, and he would have put into fitting language his opinions with regard to the vigorous politics of the working population of this ancient borough."

In responding to the resolution of welcome and appreciation which had been accorded to him with such enthusiasm, Major Duncan delivered a very happy speech, replete with geniality and good-humour. His reference to the new voters at the Conservative banquet, he said, had been misquoted and misunderstood. He had not argued

226

RETURNED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

that with increased political education working men would become Conservatives, but that increased political experience would bring about a more variegated expression of political opinion than was now to be found among the miners. He did not think this unnatural unanimity could possibly last with advancing political thought and education. Yet he found no fault with the way in which they had given their votes. He could never forget the way in which he had been received by them. Had he been their own candidate instead of their opponent he could not have been received more kindly. The only instance of bad taste was on the terrible Thursday when they all voted one way. Now, a few words about Mr. Burt himself before he sat down. He was almost afraid to quote Tennyson. But Tennyson, in his ode written on the death of the Prince Consort, spoke of "the fierce light that beats upon a throne, deepening each blot." But let him say that there was the still fiercer light of constant daily intercourse that beats upon a man's character and discloses every crevice. Mr. Burt had come through this also, and had been chosen by the people among whom he lived to represent them in Parliament. If they had had the good taste to choose himself (laughter), they would have taken something on trust—and he hoped that trust would not have been abused—but they had chosen instead one who had lived amongst them and of whom they knew everything, and he thought that was an honour beyond all compare. When Mr. Burt went to Parliament he would go as the "child of many hopes," though they were to mark that it was in the nature of things to be contrary to experience that those hopes could be entirely fulfilled; but he was confident that if there were disappointments it would not be due to want of courage or endurance on the part of their representative. He frankly wished him good-luck. That he would be

THOMAS BURT

successful in the House of Commons he fervently hoped ; that he would be upright and honourable in it he positively knew.

Among the most highly cherished memorials in my little library hangs a portrait of Major Duncan, which he presented to me on the occasion. Beneath it he wrote the following inscription :

T. BURT, Esq., M.P.,
from F. DUNCAN,

in memory of an election which was lost
and a friendship which was gained.

MORPETH, Feb. 28th, 1874.

[The writing of the Autobiography came to an end at this point, and was never resumed.]

SUPPLEMENTARY CHAPTERS

SUPPLEMENTARY CHAPTERS

I

FINANCIAL POSITION, AND A MAIDEN SPEECH

Why the Autobiography was Not Completed—The Finances of a Miners' Leader—Thrifty Living—The Relations of Members and Constituents—Declines Government Appointment—Reduces His Own Salary—Lord Granville and Mr. Burt—A Maiden Speech.

“**T**HE MOST pleasing form of biography,” says Henry Reeve, in his life of Petrarch, who was himself among the autobiographers, “is that in which a man retraces the events of his own life and the incidents that have formed his character, more especially in his earlier years, of which no other record might exist.” Thomas Burt has left us just such a record as this in the preceding chapters. He was reserving the conclusion of the narrative for the time when he would be relieved alike from the duties of his position as Secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association and his attendance, which had been constant and assiduous, at the House of Commons. In the course of a letter written in 1907 Mr. Andrew Carnegie had said: “I hope you are going to leave your memoirs for posterity, not failing to dwell on the reward beyond price which comes from life-service on behalf of your fellows.” To this Mr. Burt had replied: “What you say about writing my memoirs interests me. From time to time such a notion

THOMAS BURT

has been suggested to me. But the essential egotism of the thing acts as a deterrent. Privately, I may say that some years ago I wrote, and have in manuscript, a fairly detailed history of my childhood and of my pit-life. If I can find time I may some day proceed with it. On labour questions I fancy I could do something useful. Your remark encourages me."

But the finding of time was not the main difficulty, in the long-run. One of his sons, Mr. Wilfrid Burt, writes : " It was a matter of regret with my father, as it has been with his family, that he was unable to complete his autobiography. He had intended to retire from Parliament while he had still a few active years before him and devote his time to writing. The outbreak of the Great War prevented this plan being carried out. About November, 1916, his health completely broke down. His last three years were spent in bed, but during the whole time he was as bright and cheerful as ever. To the end he took a deep interest in all that went on, but for years he was unable to write, and owing to bronchial trouble he could not dictate ; but his intellect remained unimpaired, and up to within a week of his death he was able to read without glasses. Throughout his illness and suffering he never murmured or complained. He always had a word of encouragement for everybody. His bedroom was a place of laughter and poetry. No one could feel depressed in his presence."

When Mr. Burt first entered the House of Commons there was some not unnatural surprise at his inconspicuous figure. He was rather a small man. In no respect did he correspond to the then generally prevalent idea of the Labour leader. There was nothing robustious about him. One of his sons writes : " Until he was about fourteen years of age my father was considered to be a big lad for his years. After that time he grew little, if any,

FINANCIAL POSITION

in height, and not much in weight. He never weighed more than about ten stone, and most of the time that I remember him he weighed under nine stone. The heavy toil and the deprivation of his early years left a lasting mark on his body, but nothing could daunt his spirit. That early experience was largely instrumental in causing him to dedicate his life to the service of his fellow-men, and particularly to the service of those who toiled in the mines."

The coalowner to whom, in the early days of his leadership, Mr. Burt so trenchantly replied through the columns of the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, described "a certain Mr. Burt," who, he suggested, could have no more brains than "Baalam's companion," as belonging to "a set of ruffians" and "plausible knaves," "whose sole object is to live on the hard-earned money of the working classes, whilst they strut about in fine clothes and idleness." Mr. Wilfrid Burt says on this subject :

"When my father became Secretary to the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, in July, 1865, he received a salary of 27s. 6d. a week, out of which rent and rates had to be paid and coal purchased. Incidentally, it may be remarked that he provided what scanty office accommodation the Association boasted. Father's house consisted only of a kitchen and a bedroom, and he did his secretarial work in the bedroom, where he received any visitors who had to call upon him in connection with the affairs of the Association. As a coal-hewer he had, on the average, earned a higher cash wage than he received during his first year as miners' Secretary, in addition to which he had received from the colliery company free house and coal, and the use of a large garden, in which he grew all, or nearly all, the vegetables required by his little household. Mother, who has a remarkably good memory, tells me that the rent of their little house at

THOMAS BURT

Cowpen Quay was £6 10s. per annum, or 2s. 6d. a week. Coal, taking the average all the year round, cost about another 2s. 6d. weekly. Adding the rates (water cost 4d. weekly), one finds that at least 5s. 6d. had to be deducted from the 27s. 6d. a week for commodities or services which had previously been furnished by the colliery in addition to the wages paid in cash. When one includes the value of the vegetables previously grown by my father in his garden, and now having to be bought, one finds that his new employment practically meant a 25 per cent. reduction in the purchasing-power of his wages. At this time he had a family of two infant daughters. Had he not had as loyal, loving, and capable a wife as ever a man was blessed with, my father's career as a trade-union official would have been wrecked at its commencement."

Election to Parliament was accompanied by a much higher rate of payment for services rendered to the Association; but necessary expenses were so disproportionately increased that the exercise of thrift was just as imperative as ever. One of Mr. Burt's sons is again the witness. He writes: "He always lived frugally, and he had no desire for ostentation. He ate no more than was necessary to preserve life and health, and the food he took was invariably of the plainest kinds. I remember that in my youth, though I had forgotten the matter till one of my brothers reminded me of it, two of our daily meals always consisted principally, in most cases entirely, of oatmeal porridge. This would continue for fully fifteen years after father entered Parliament."

When he went to the House of Commons Mr. Burt's salary was increased to £500 a year. At no time did it rise above that modest limit, within which he had to bring the expenses of two homes, one in London and

FINANCIAL POSITION

one in the north. There came a time when, on his own initiative, £100 of this salary was resigned. Writing to the members of his Association in 1888, when the miners were suffering from the consequences of a disastrous strike of which he had disapproved, he said: "You were the first trade union that put forward your Secretary as a Parliamentary representative. . . . The experiment . . . has already continued longer than I ever anticipated. Nor could the experiment have been tested more severely. The coal-trade is liable to extreme fluctuations—in Northumberland peculiarly so. I was elected when we were on the crest of a wave of prosperity unprecedented in our history. Wages were higher than ever they had been before or than ever they have been since. From that time till now trade has gone from bad to worse, until, what with low wages and irregularity of employment, your struggle for life is at present of the keenest kind. . . . Under great difficulties you have thus far honourably fulfilled all your pledges. For myself, I will only say that to the best of my ability I have been equally faithful to you. Whatever my defects, whatever my errors, I have never, directly or indirectly, traded on the position you gave me. I have declined offers which could have been honourably accepted, and which would have made me comparatively independent. I declined them mainly because their acceptance would have severed the connection between us. . . .

"Since I ceased, on your invitation, to work with my hands, you have, while bravely fighting the battle of life under the hardest conditions, continued to pay me what must appear to you to be a large salary. Whatever the future may have in store, I consider this is not discreditable to you or to me, and by me, certainly, it will never be forgotten."

To the Committee of his Union he wrote: "If the

THOMAS BURT

salary is a source of dissatisfaction, and if some rearrangement is likely to bring peace and harmony, I am quite ready voluntarily to surrender a substantial portion of the amount I receive. . . . So far as I am concerned, I am determined, come what may, that I won't fight with the miners of Northumberland; nor shall the subject of contention be a controversy over the amount I am to be paid. I am prepared in future to accept £400 a year."

"On Mr. Burt's offer we give you no advice," said the Committee, in a document addressed to each of the members. Concerning what took place at an interview with Mr. Burt, the Committee said: "He was asked if it were true what he had been driven to state in self-defence when assailed on the question of his salary during the agitation in connection with the late strike—that he had been offered a situation with a larger salary than he had from the miners, and had refused it. He said it was quite true, and your Committee beg to state that the offer was a situation with £900 salary, rising to £1,000, and a retiring pension of about £600 per annum. This was a tempting offer, and could have been honourably accepted by Mr. Burt without any dishonour to the miners as his employers. But it was rejected by him, no doubt because of his long term of service as your representative, his respect for your kindness to him, and his desire to serve and benefit the class to which he has always considered it an honour to belong."

The official employment to which reference was made both by Mr. Burt and by the Committee of his Association was a post under the Local Government Board when Sir Charles Dilke was the head of that Department. Sir Charles wrote to him a few years later: "I remember offering you one of the principal Inspectorships—or, as they are called, General Inspectorships—under the

FINANCIAL POSITION

Local Government Board, and your refusal on the ground that you wished to remain the servant of the miners. I asked you if I was right in thinking that nothing would take you away from that service so long as the miners generally wished you to continue it. However, if you had any idea of giving up your service in Parliament, I thought that you could do most useful work to the country in the dignified and powerful post which I suggested for your acceptance. You replied that you wished to go on in your then course of Parliamentary service. I could not profess to regret this; but I regretted, for the Local Government Board, not to be able to obtain for that office the assistance of one whose fitness for such a post as that suggested would have been almost universally recognized in both political parties."

The salary of General Inspector under the Local Government Board began, as the miners' executive pointed out, at £900 a year, rising to £1,000. There was also first-class railway-fare to and from residence, with one guinea per night subsistence allowance when from home on duty. The retiring pension amounted to about two-thirds of the salary. "When offering me the post," wrote Mr. Burt, "Sir Charles said he had mentioned the subject to no one save to Mr. Chamberlain, and that he expressed his warm approval."

To write on these subjects is to anticipate much that had taken place since Mr. Burt's triumphant return as the member for Morpeth, but there will be no place in the ensuing narrative in which they can more conveniently come than here. The sturdy independence and mental clearness of the first miners' member sent to Parliament were qualities that were effectively displayed at the very beginning of his political life. A main peculiarity of his position was that he had no disinclination to go back to the pits. If he could not serve

THOMAS BURT

the miners on terms that were satisfactory to himself he would serve them on no other. What was to be his position as a member of Parliament? Was he to be a delegate, acting under direct and precise instructions from those who returned him? To what he has said in his autobiography on this subject, which arose at once, there may be added repeated and specific declarations. In a speech made at Morpeth before his election he said: "If it is meant that I will sell my own birthright, so to speak, and vote and speak in favour of principles that I abhor, then certainly I am not going as a delegate."

Fourteen years later, writing to the members of his Association in a time of great trouble and loud though not widely diffused discontent, he said of his first speech as a candidate: "I distinctly at the outset took political ground. I declared that I would contest the seat against all comers on behalf of 'Labour and Radical politics.' I went on to say that working men did not want class representation, but that they objected to class exclusion. I denounced the notion, which had then, as it has now, its advocates, that working men's representatives should be neither Whig, Tory, nor Radical; that they should not be politicians, but only Labour representatives. I asserted that, while in a working-class constituency the representative should thoroughly understand Labour questions and be prepared to support them, still, the only sound doctrine was to select a member because of his personal character and fitness and on account of political agreement with his constituents. With these opinions clearly set forth you elected me. My views on these points are unaltered."

He had been accused of giving up to party what was meant for the miners, and he replied: "Nothing can be done in Parliament without hearty co-operation on the part of those who are in general agreement. Nine-

FINANCIAL POSITION

tenths of the questions that come before the House of Commons are of a political character. Many that are not strictly Labour questions are fully as important to the workmen as those that come under that designation. If you form a Labour Party, therefore, you do not get rid of the evils of party, but you multiply and intensify those evils. The suggestion is that the Labour member must give up his conscience and judgment on the great majority of the questions that come before Parliament, and that he must do this in order that he may emancipate himself from the thralldom, the degradation, and the corruption of party! Such a view is not less insulting to the workman than it is absurd in itself. It is saying in the most practical way that the workman is something less than a man and a citizen; that he is a mere wealth-producing tool; that he should separate himself from humanity, from great questions of justice between individuals and between one nation and another, and should concentrate all his energies on matters that affect him as a manual labourer. Our aim should be to unite men, not to divide them; to break down, and not to intensify and accentuate class distinctions."

That was his reply to the new school of Labour politics founded by Mr. Keir Hardie. "Whether I am in Parliament or outside," he said to the members of his Union, "and whether officially associated with you or not, to improve, to elevate, and to assist the worker will be in the future, as it has been in the past, one of the chief objects of my life."

Though he was sent to Parliament by men who, for the most part, were recording their votes for the first time, Mr. Burt had become member for an old constituency which, up to the time of the first Reform Bill, had sent its two members to Westminster. Some of its representatives had risen to considerable political distinction. Lord

THOMAS BURT

Granville, for so many years British Foreign Secretary, was member for Morpeth when he was still Lord Leveson-Gower. He was succeeded by Sir George Grey, a famous Home Secretary in his time, and grandfather to the present Viscount Grey. It was Sir George, grown old in the service of the State, who retired from the representation in order to leave a clear field for Mr. Burt. Lord Granville was one of the first of those who welcomed the new member to London. As many offers of civility had been declined, there being a disposition to make a "lion" of the miners' member and no corresponding disposition to be lionized, Lord Granville sent an insistent invitation to Mr. Burt to dine with him. He had the right to convert the invitation into a demand, as he explained, on the ground that he was an old member for the same constituency. But there was a difficulty about dress. When John Bright was first offered a Ministerial position by Mr. Gladstone he refused to think of it until he was assured that in his case the Queen would on no occasion insist on the regulation Court equipment. Mr. Burt's difficulty was about the ordinary evening clothes. "Wear what you like," said Lord Granville, "and don't stand on ceremony. The others are coming in their shooting-jackets." The hint which had obviously been given to the other guests was a typical instance of Lord Granville's extreme considerateness, which, in some quarters, was held to disqualify him for the post of Foreign Secretary. This was a dinner-party at which both Liberals and Conservatives, members of both Houses, were present; and the new member for Morpeth sat next to Lord John Manners, not yet Duke of Rutland, whose famous distich about the old nobility he had, no doubt, quoted on many an occasion, with that quiet and incisive humour which always went straight to the mark.

His first speech in the House of Commons was made

FINANCIAL POSITION

on Sir George Trevelyan's County Franchise Bill. He had then been in Parliament four months or so, and as he had grown quite popular in that time, though he was still an object of curiosity, there was great eagerness to see how he would acquit himself as a speaker. Mr. Disraeli's Government was then in power, and Sir George's was a private Bill. Its rejection had been moved in the customary form, "That it be read a second time this day six months," by a Mr. Salt, who has left no other Parliamentary memories behind him. Mr. Burt followed. His speech contained about eight-hundred words, and the verbatim report filled only one page of Hansard, but it was a speech of unusual cogency, made by a man of obviously original mind from a wholly fresh point of view. He said, among other things: "In the two northern counties, Northumberland and Durham, there are about fifty thousand adult miners. Of that number not more than five thousand are voters, and the forty-five thousand who are not voters are placed in all respects under entirely similar conditions to those who have votes. They occupy the same kind of house, they follow the same kind of employment, and their social status and educational position are alike. . . . They seldom remove out of the county. They do remove from one colliery to another; hence this state of things arises: A man may possess a vote one day, and if he removes a few hundred yards he may lose his vote just as much as if he went out of the county or to the Antipodes. We have this state of things also: Two men may be working—and they frequently are working—in the same pit and at the same place as mates, and one of them may have a vote and the other may not. Their position is in every respect indetical. . . . I have heard a great deal about the danger of admitting so large a number of uncultivated and uneducated men to the franchise. Sir, I believe that the danger lies in excluding

THOMAS BURT

them, and there is nothing that is doing more at the present time to alienate the sympathies and affections of the best and most intelligent of the working class than these invidious and unnecessary distinctions, founded as they are on no principle of reason or common-sense."

"The speech which has been made by a working-man representative, the member for Morpeth," said Mr. W. E. Forster, "shows the advantage the House has gained by his entrance into it, and I should be glad if a larger proportion of working-men representatives could bring their help to bear." In the first instance, and without any oratorical pretence, Mr. Burt had established himself not only as one of those members who must be listened to, but as one who could not be listened to without profit and enjoyment.

During that same session of 1874 he addressed the House for a second time, in one of the shortest speeches on record. The question was a Parliamentary grant to Prince Leopold, subsequently known as the Duke of Albany. Speaking for the space of a few minutes only, he implored the House to adopt some scheme by means of which repeated application to Parliament for the maintenance of the Royal Family should be brought to an end.

This was one of those infrequent speeches which result in a change of policy. Parliament was never again approached in quite the same way for a like purpose, Mr. Gladstone securing the adoption, even under a Conservative Government, of a plan for so changing the financial relations of the Crown and the Parliament that no similar applications have since been made.

II

THE OUTLOOK OF A MINERS' LEADER

His Views at the Outset of His Trade-Union Career—Boys in Coal-pits—The Miners' Grievances—Hunted for by the Police—Early Difficulties as Secretary—Efforts to Establish Amicable Relations between Employers and Employed—A Remarkable Coalowner—The Birth of the Joint Committee.

IT WILL HAVE been noted that when the author of the foregoing autobiography became a trade-union official he was twenty-seven years of age, not twenty-two only, as recently affirmed by another writer on the subject. He was a young man without grievances, either against his employers or their agents. He did not dislike his work, which had left him some small amount of leisure for self-cultivation; he was not an agitator; he had no craving for power over other men, and no passion for public speaking. So far as his own affairs were concerned, he was, as we have seen, a thoroughly contented man, who was seeking nothing for himself, but was ardently desirous for a change for the better in the circumstances of those with whom he lived and worked.

His views were set forth in much detail, and with great clearness of statement, in the evidence given in 1865, a few months prior to his becoming the Secretary of his Union, before the Select Committee of which mention is made in the autobiography. He was asked if he could read and write easily, the object being to make it appear that boys employed in the coal-pit had opportunities to

THOMAS BURT

learn to read and write if they chose to make use of them. Mr. Burt pointed out that, "in general, from the length of the hours of their employment, they are so tired and fatigued that those who do go are found to sleep there during a considerable part of the time that they are at the night-schools." The general impression among the miners, he said, was that children commenced to work too early, and that they worked too long. Among the boys employed in the pits, it may be noted here, there were no "half-timers." The colliery-owners deliberately and habitually broke the law of the land. "The provisions of the Mines Inspection Act were evaded in that respect," said Mr. Burt. The boys, he added, went underground at three or four in the morning and their labours came to an end at four or five in the afternoon. Legislation, he thought, was required against parents and against employers alike. The trapper-boy, he observed, "is imprisoned just as if he were in a cell or a gaol." There was curiosity as to how he got his own education under these conditions. He explained that the work of self-education began, not in boyhood, but when he became a coal-hewer. "I saw the necessity of improving my mind, and after I became a hewer I set to and did the best I could."

The miners wished to have ventilation extended to every accessible place in the workings, Mr. Burt told this Special Committee, which was listening to what was really a startling revelation of the conditions of life underground. There were coal-seams in his neighbourhood which were only thirty inches thick. The men had to go down on their hands and knees to work in them. The ventilation was so bad that they could scarcely breathe. "It is a wretched affair when it is like that," said Mr. Burt. It was just another case of the non-enforcement of the law. The Committee thought

THE OUTLOOK OF A MINERS' LEADER

that the remedy lay with the inspector, as, in fact, it did ; but, said the witness, the miners were timid about applying to the inspectors. "There are cases of men being 'sacrificed,' and losing their employment in consequence of applying to the inspector."

There is nothing here, it will be seen, about wages. Though most strikes were brought about on some question of earnings, the wages question was far from occupying the foremost place in the list of the miners' grievances. There was first of all the desire to make the life of the boys less a burden to them ; then the miner thought of his own comfort and safety. He wanted more ventilation and more inspection of the colliery workings. He wanted to be safe from dismissal if he asked for the proper observance of the laws that had been made for his protection. His demand, on the whole, was for fair treatment and reasonable consideration by his employers. There was still some deceit in the weighing of coals. Check-weighmen had recently been appointed to ensure the just weighing of the coal sent up by the men from the pits, but Mr. Burt "had heard of machines which were not true." This meant that the men were cheated out of part of their earnings, though the witness, always restrained in speech, did not put it quite in that way. There was another kind of dishonesty when miners lost their lives in the course of their employment. No miner, Mr. Burt pointed out, was ever summoned to a coroner's inquest, "and juries, composed of tradesmen, frequently gave verdicts that were not in accordance with the evidence."

"A workman's lot," Mr. Burt maintained, "should be in itself satisfactory, and he should be under no necessity of changing it in order to better his position." "The life of a miner," he said on another occasion, "is of as much importance as that of a Bishop." Possibly he was thinking

THOMAS BURT

of the time when a Bishop's palace was turned into a prison for three hundred men out of the coal-pits.

In a preceding chapter Mr. Burt observes concerning the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, of which he was so long the guiding spirit, that "the history of the society might be worth writing in some detail." As a matter of fact, the writing of that history was one of the tasks which he reserved for his years of retirement. It was to have followed on the completion of the autobiography, which, itself never completed, happily contains, in the article quoted from the *Shipping World*, an admirable summary of what the Association had accomplished. That which can now be written will be nothing more than amplification of his statement and accentuation of his own remarkable services in making the Northumberland Miners' Union a pioneer and an example. One of his sons, Mr. Wilfrid Burt, writes thus of his father's acceptance of office as Secretary :

"Prison was then more likely to be his destination than Parliament. Indeed, few weeks had passed after his accession to office ere he was pursued—or, rather, sought after, for he made no attempt at flight—by the late R. O. Lamb and the local constable, armed with a warrant for his arrest. Mr. Lamb, who was one of the principal owners of Cramlington Colliery, afterwards became a friend and admirer of my father, and it was from him that I heard the story, nearly thirty years ago. Neither Mr. Lamb nor the constable knew my father at the time. As Mr. Lamb said, they were looking for a loud-mouthed, truculent-looking ruffian, and although they were at least once face to face with their quarry, it never occurred to them that he was the man they wanted."

He had his difficulties—his very grave and most discouraging difficulties—from the first. "He more than once," writes Wilfrid Burt, "told me that he often

THE OUTLOOK OF A MINERS' LEADER

had great trouble in carrying many of the members of his Union with him in his endeavours to advance their cause according to his ideals. For instance, he considered that the first essential was that men should be treated like men. There should be no domineering on the part of the employers, no cringing or loss of self-respect on the part of the men. Often he found that men were more concerned with obtaining an advance of wages than with these matters, which, to him, were much more essential. On the question of working hours, he aimed at securing ample leisure for all workers. Believing profoundly in the essential goodness of human nature, where it has a chance, he considered that in most cases men and youths would use their leisure to improve themselves, mentally and physically, by reading, discussion, clean, healthful sport, and meditative walks.

"Both in the matter of wages and working hours, my father felt very strongly that advancement should be attained by the men and their employers through negotiation, by means of trade-union effort, and not by legislative enactment. My idea of my father's principal aim as a trade-union leader is that he set out to endeavour to increase the sum of human happiness. True happiness, he considered, could only be based on a serene conscience, and this entailed high character, gentleness combined with courage, conscientiousness of work, of duty well done, and cleanliness of mind. In his opinion the purely material was comparatively unimportant. There must be sufficient to support life and physical efficiency. Means of providing cleanliness, warmth, decent housing, fresh air, he held to be of the very first moment. But, beyond the essentials, purely material advantages were, in his view, only in a very minor degree conducive to happiness.

"As a lad, scarcely in my 'teens," Mr. Wilfrid Burt continues, "I remember thinking my father somewhat

THOMAS BURT

conservative in his opposition to State regulation of wages and working hours. In a few words he explained his attitude. Such matters were best arranged by discussion between the representatives of the employers and workmen actually engaged in the industry concerned. Between them these men understood the industry in all its phases, and were able to make the most equable and advantageous arrangements, whilst the intercourse between them widened the outlook on both sides, and promoted sympathy and understanding, thus tending to the extension and increased prosperity of the industry. State regulation, on the other hand, meant regulations introduced largely by men with no knowledge of the industry they were regulating. The regulations so introduced were apt to be hampering and inelastic, and so tend to discourage expansion and prosperity, thus causing unemployment and serious distress. These things were clearly seen by Thomas Burt more than fifty years ago.

“With these views, my father naturally directed his efforts towards establishing amicable relations between employers and workmen. He recognized that the prosperity of the workers depended upon the prosperity of the industry in which they were engaged, and that a strike, even if successful, was bound to reduce in some measure the prosperity of the strikers. He therefore invariably opposed a strike as a means of securing an advance or averting a reduction of wages. A strike for such an object was not good business. Moreover, it was ethically unsound, though there might be rare occasions when unreasonable employers, through a stubborn refusal to negotiate or to submit a wages question to arbitration, might render such a strike inevitable. One principle for which he was always prepared to fight was the right of the workmen to combine, the right of collective bargaining ; that is, recognition of the men’s organization

THE OUTLOOK OF A MINERS' LEADER

by the employers. That admitted, he was convinced that, save in most exceptional cases, more could be gained by friendly negotiation than could ever be achieved by striking. After all, the final settlement must be attained by negotiation, unless, indeed, one side attains so decisive a victory as to enable it to force its will on the side that is beaten. Such a victory is seldom achieved by a trade union."

The aims and principles here described were all gradually, but splendidly, realized. One of the first things to be done was to convince the men that strikes were wasteful and avoidable. The men, for their part, were strongly convinced that strikes were the only possible remedy for their grievances. At one colliery in Northumberland, and in Mr. Burt's immediate neighbourhood, there had been twenty-three strikes in twenty-two years. One of the northern coalowners of the day is the subject of a remarkable passage in a book recently issued by the Cambridge University Press. The author, Mr. E. Welbourne, describes him as a coalowner who was memorable because his gross ill-treatment of his men produced the only strike in which every newspaper in the district took the side of the men. The scene, it should be said, was the county of Durham, and the strike occurred in 1863, two years or so before Mr. Burt became Secretary of the Miners' Union in the adjoining county. This coalowner had organized a system of fines, out of which it was said that he made £5,000 a year from coal for the hewing of which he paid not a farthing. If his pits were notorious for their fraudulent cruelty, the strike soon became notorious for the brutality with which the strikers were treated. The man knew, from the part he had played in the strike of 1831, how best he could hit the men. He refused to let the tradesmen in his pit-villages give credit to the strikers, and he turned women and

THOMAS BURT

children into the streets without shelter in December. The vicar, curate, and a Catholic priest, who helped these wretched families, were deprived of their allowance of coal. His case was so bad that he could not persuade the London papers to say a word for him. But he beat and broke the men's Union. He was a pious man, according to his lights, and in one year he gave away £73,000 for religious purposes. "There is no doubt," says Mr. Welbourne, "that he laid the foundations of the fortune which allowed him to be lavish in charity by a system of management so callously commercial that it passed unnoticed into absolute robbery."

One of the results of Mr. Burt's early work for the miners was that such men became impossible. They disappeared as completely as if they had been wiped out by a convulsion of nature. What it would now be difficult to believe, if the evidence were not so overwhelming, is that they can ever have existed.

The Joint Committee, described in Mr. Burt's communication to the *Shipping World*, came into existence in February, 1873. There were six representatives on either side. It is remarkable that in the book already mentioned, Mr. E. Welbourne's greatly detailed prize essay on *The Miners' Unions of Northumberland and Durham*, there is no reference to the foundation of this Joint Committee, which was the commencement of a new epoch in the history of the mining industry. "This," as Mr. Cox Meech has remarked, "was one of the great achievements of Thomas Burt's life." Undoubtedly it made a peace previously undreamed of between the coalowners and the men who were employed in their pits. Up to that time the owners had refused to meet the men's representatives, their point of view being that they alone must have the fixing of the rate of wages and the conditions of labour. On the other hand, the

250

THE OUTLOOK OF A MINERS' LEADER

men regarded the Union as a machine for the organization and management of strikes when occasion arose. Mr. Burt's policy was conciliation. By December, 1871, he had advanced so far as to bring about a meeting of six representatives from each side, with the result that the working hours of the boys were shortened. There was another such meeting in 1872, on a question of wages, when the employers agreed to a 10 per cent. advance. The Joint Committee established these meetings in a regular and permanent form. At a conference of the Miners' National Association, held at Leeds a few months later, Mr. Burt said of the new condition of things in Northumberland: "So far from employers opposing the Joint Committee, they are in the habit of calling in its services in case of dispute; in fact, its action has been to keep the pits going and to make matters smooth. If it had not existed, long-protracted strikes must have ensued."

The Mr. R. O. Lamb who is mentioned in Mr. Wilfrid Burt's communication was one of the most able and eminent of northern coalowners and colliery managers, a man of suave manners, even temper, and enlightened views; but for many years he was hostile to Mr. Burt and the Union, and the fact that he was not a member of the first Joint Committee is to be accounted for only by his distaste for that mode of settlement. It is therefore a pleasant duty to anticipate events by recording here something of what was said by Mr. Lamb on the occasion of the opening of the Burt Hall at Newcastle in 1895. Mr. Burt, he observed, was connected with Seaton Delaval for many years. "For my own part, I feel satisfied that, distinguished as was the line of the Delavals, no member of that family will hold a higher place in history than Mr. Burt." There had, he continued, been an enormous increase in the coal-trade, and great

THOMAS BURT

expansion of docks and railways, during the century ; but he was satisfied that the greatest improvement that had taken place was the cordial agreement that existed between the coalowners and the miners.

This most significant change of attitude was the victory of one man's personality. Nobody had more frequent or better opportunities of witnessing Mr. Burt's conduct of the men's side of the case in these Joint Committee negotiations than Dr. Spence Watson, who for many years filled the purely honorary position of chairman and umpire. Mr. Cox Meech has placed on record what Dr. Spence Watson said to him on this subject. "Mr. Burt is a man with a fine mind, and he is the master of it," he observed—"a marvellously well-trained mind. At first I thought he was yielding too much for a man who had a case to make out. A point would be raised by the other side ; he would quietly say, 'I can't answer that.' And another point would be made. He again would assent : 'You are quite right' ; and so the other side appeared to be having all its own way. But when Mr. Burt came to state his own case, his previous admissions made his arguments all the stronger. He disarmed his opponents by his scrupulous fairness. He never insisted on a point, never even made a point, he could not maintain."

And so, as was said by a Newcastle newspaper on the occasion of the opening of the Burt Hall, there was an end to "the collisions, the skirmishes, the battles royal, the signing of truces, and other actions" which had been characteristic of the state of things previously in existence. "Everybody must see nowadays," said Mr. Burt, addressing the Miners' National Union, of which he was President, in 1895, "that the great problem of those times was the reconciliation of the interests of Labour and of Capital. It was not an easy thing to do. It was not a

THE OUTLOOK OF A MINERS' LEADER

thing that could be done very speedily." But it was done ; and so far as one can see, it was in this particular instance done once for all. When the Socialists first attempted to capture the Northumberland miners Mr. Burt said : " Their plan is Collectivism—the nationalizing not only of the land and the raw material of industry, but also what they call the implements of production. It is too large a question for me to discuss at this time. I will not argue that it is impracticable. All I will suggest is that there are certain preliminary difficulties in the way. . . . I take the opportunity of reaffirming my faith in the older methods. They may be slow, but I do not see anything that is likely to be quicker, and I certainly do not see anything that is likely to confer greater benefits with less friction, with more good not only to the workmen themselves, but to the whole community. Therefore, for my part, I am prepared to adhere to the old lines until I see something better."

III

LABOUR AND PARLIAMENT

Labour Questions in the Early 'Seventies—The Trade Unionists and a Royal Commission—Mr. Burt and the House of Commons—Early Parliamentary Friendships—"The Dogs should not Suffer"—"Not an Orator; not even a Talker"—The Demand for Speeches.

THOMAS BURT entered Parliament at precisely the most critical stage in the history of Labour legislation. Only three years had passed since the Trade Union Act had given a legal recognition and status to trade-unionism. There had since that time been a constant demand by the employers for the repeal of that measure. On the other hand, the demands of Labour had greatly extended and become more insistent. A Parliamentary programme containing eleven definite demands had recently been formulated by the Trades Union Congress. The main things asked for in this carefully considered document were the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, and the amendment of the Master and Servant Act in such a way that breach of contract should cease to be a criminal offence; a modification of the law of conspiracy; such a limitation of the qualifications of jurymen as would admit workmen to the jury-box; a Compensation for Injuries Bill; a Nine Hours' Bill for women and children employed in factories; an Act to prevent truck, or the supply of goods in lieu of wages; and a Merchant Shipping Act on Mr. Plimsoll's lines.

LABOUR AND PARLIAMENT

The heavy task of supporting these demands in Parliament fell on members who were new to the House of Commons. "There were then only two Labour members, and they were rather Liberals than Labour men," Mr. T. P. O'Connor recently observed, in recalling his early days in Parliament in his *Sunday Times* memories. "These," he continued, "were Thomas Burt and Alexander Macdonald. One represented Morpeth and the other Stafford. No two men could have been more unlike each other. 'Tommy Burt,' as he was universally called, was a small, delicate little man, with a long, brownish-red beard, a very gentle manner, a very soft voice, a very sweet character. Everybody loved and admired him; and, though his opinions were considered extreme at the time, he expressed them with such sweet reasonableness that he was always heard with respect. He lived to be Father of the House of Commons, and was my immediate predecessor.

"Macdonald was of a rougher type," Mr. O'Connor went on to say. "He was a stout, broad-shouldered, somewhat exuberant type of man. He was said to be fairly well off. He had a somewhat raucous voice, and now and then interrupted speakers a little roughly, and the chroniclers of the period used to make scornful allusions to his robust but somewhat discordant 'ear, ear!' Towards the last years of his life in the House he looked very ill, and sometimes he would lie down half-stretched on his seat, with closed eyes and pallid cheeks and a drawn mouth."

The means of Alexander Macdonald were, in fact, rather considerable. He was a workmen's representative in a quite genuine sense, but much water had flowed under the bridges since he had been a workman. He was really a capitalist and an employer of labour—a fact which, however, did not in the least diminish his devotion to

THOMAS BURT

the cause of the working class, and particularly that of the mining population.

The Parliament to which Thomas Burt and Alexander Macdonald were returned witnessed an immediate change of Government. Mr. Gladstone's Administration had been beaten at the polls by a majority of fifty. The hope of destroying the Trade Union Act naturally rose to a great height under these circumstances, but was to suffer an unprecedented disappointment. What began as a movement against the trade unions resulted in what has since been known as "The Workmen's Charter." The courts of law had quite recently, by means of the sentences in the memorable Gas Stokers' case, and by what was implied thereby, deprived workmen's organizations of any rights worth having. "The two parties, representing Capital and Labour," writes George Howell, "were face to face. Never before were employers of labour in all the great industries so well organized. . . . It was not merely an organization to resist advance in wages, reductions in the hours of labour, or other labour movements, but a combination to impede, frustrate, and obstruct progressive legislation in favour of equal rights, just laws, and the impartial administration of law in Courts of Justice."

This was a conspiracy with which the majority in the new Parliament was expected to ally itself; but the Government, of which Mr. Disraeli became the head, composed of men who had been as much surprised as their opponents by the results of the General Election, had no settled Labour policy. There was no resource but the one that is traditionally put in operation in such cases. Under pressure from outside, a Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the labour laws. This was regarded by the trade unions alike as a threat and as a device for indefinitely postponing matters that were held

LABOUR AND PARLIAMENT

to be already ripe for legislation. The Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress denounced the proposed Commission as "a surprise, an intrigue, and a fraud." Many prominent trade-unionists declined to give evidence, and George Howell, afterwards himself a member of the House, and at that time the Secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, was excluded from the Member's Lobby, which he frequented daily, on that ground alone.

Only two out of thirteen Labour candidates had survived the General Election. Even Labour sympathizers were turned out of their seats. This was the case with Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, whom the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress associated with Mr. Burt and Mr. Macdonald in complaining that no representative of the working class had been invited to a seat on the Commission "until within an hour or two of the time when the names were to be submitted to Her Majesty at Windsor." "Then," says George Howell, in his admirable precise history of Labour legislation, "Mr. Burt appears to have preferred that Mr. Macdonald should serve, rather than himself." He did not, however, share in the surprise and alarm of other leading trade-unionists of that day, his view being that the Royal Commission might be turned to good account—a sanguine judgment which was fully justified by events. A majority of fifty is meagre and insufficient where a policy of reaction is contemplated, but is ample where there is a disposition to retain office by means of compromise. "There is," says Mr. Howell, "this advantage in a Conservative Government: that if they propose useful and progressive measures they may count on Liberal support in the House."

The immediate danger was the proposed repeal of the Trade Union Act of 1871. The Government actually

THOMAS BURT

brought in a Bill with that end in view. The Act of 1871 provided for the registration of trade unions, protected their funds, and relieved their members from liability to prosecution on the sole ground of their membership. Up to that time it was held, as Lord Loreburn told the House of Lords at a much later date, "that strikes were unlawful transactions; and to such an extent had the penalizing of these legitimate and useful associations proceeded that it was decided in the year 1865 that a man could rob a trade union and embezzle its money."

The proposed measure of repeal was so steadily and resolutely resisted that it had to be withdrawn almost as soon as its character became known. In the long-run, also, the Report of the Royal Commission on the Labour laws was treated as if the Commission had never sat; and Mr. Cross, the Home Secretary, so far from resisting the trade unions, gave way, after much pressure and postponement, to the most important of the trade-unionist demands. Stated briefly, the result was the triumphant passing of a measure which declared that "agreement or combination by two or more persons to do or procure to be done any act in contemplation or furtherance of a trade dispute between employer and workmen shall not be indictable as conspiracy if the said act committed by one person would not be punishable as a crime." In fact, the law as to workmen's organizations was brought into conformity with the law of the land. The battle had to be fought over again some years later, after the Taff Vale judgment, and again the victory fell to the trade-unionists, the Trade Disputes Act being in reality a reassertion of the principle adopted in 1875. Mr. Burt's large share in establishing, and then re-establishing, the right of Labour to act in combination, as the employers were acting, has long been matter of Parliamentary history.

Then, too, the session of 1874 witnessed the passing

LABOUR AND PARLIAMENT

of three Labour measures of considerable importance, and it was soon evident that the return of Mr. Burt and Mr. Macdonald was to be coincident with the opening-out of a new epoch in Labour legislation, though the Compensation for Injuries to Workmen Bill had dropped with the change of Ministry, and was not to be revived.

It thus chanced that from the first days of his Parliamentary life Mr. Burt found himself in the very thick of that kind of work for which he was supremely fitted, and of which he was longing to take his share. He adapted himself to his new sphere without trouble of any sort, and without either shrinking or pretension. He seemed at once at home in the House of Commons, and he made a good impression from the start. There was no time lost in obtaining a foothold. His first brief, modest, quiet speech made it clear that he was a man to be listened to and to be taken note of. The way was made easy for him, he told his constituents, by the friendly attitude of members from other classes of society. It was really made clear for him by the unexpected gentleness of his manner, the mildness of his speech, the invariable force of his argument, his obviously deep convictions, and his habitual convincingness. There was no general hostility to Labour, he said in the same speech. When politicians had failed in their attempts to deal with Labour questions it had been from want of special knowledge of social conditions rather than from a deficient sympathy with the working class.

Recalling those early days in Parliament when, by a few days, he had completed his eightieth year, he said to an interviewer: "Sir William Harcourt and I were first attracted to each other by our love of books. I remember his surprise when he learnt, from our conversation, that I had read the whole of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* in my early manhood when working in the pits.

THOMAS BURT

Sir William's brilliant qualities as a debater and writer were well known ; but his warmth of affection, his keen interest in protecting the health and the lives of the workers, when he was at the head of a great Government department, were not so well known or so fully recognized. When he was Home Secretary I know that he took infinite pains in selecting efficient inspectors of mines and factories, often appointing men who had sprung from the ranks of the workmen.

"The friends with whom I have had the closest communion have been, like myself, great lovers of poetry. To me it has always seemed that with anyone to whom you can recite poetry you must always be in perfect harmony. It is something like the situation of a wise and sensitive man with regard to his religious views. He will hardly be likely to obtrude them upon his friends, much less upon strangers. The members of Parliament with whom I have had this poetic communion were Mr. Acland and Sir Edward (now Viscount) Grey. Sir Edward, as I prefer to call him, and I have recited poetry to each other from Wordsworth, Tennyson, and other poets when I have had the honour of accepting his invitation to breakfast.

"When I entered the House of Commons I knew only two men, Mr. Joseph Cowen and Mr. Alexander Macdonald. For the first six or seven years Mr. Macdonald and I were the only two Labour members. Mr. H. Broadhurst—an able, trusted representative of labour—was elected in the early 'eighties, and did excellent work for labour, afterwards becoming Under-Secretary for the Home Department. About the time of Mr. Broadhurst's election Mr. Macdonald died, so that until 1885 there were still but two Labour members in the House. In Mr. Macdonald's short Parliamentary career he did splendid work for labour, his chief topics being employers' liability

LABOUR AND PARLIAMENT

for accidents, the abolition of truck, and the protection of life and limb in the mines. The Employers' Liability Bill afterwards became the Compensation of Workmen's Act—a most valuable measure."

The mention of Mr. Broadhurst, who was returned to Parliament in 1880, and who at once ranged himself alongside Mr. Burt as a representative alike of Liberalism and of Labour, recalls an amusing passage in his book of reminiscences. One of Mr. Burt's early speeches in the House of Commons, it may be mentioned here, was a defence of the northern miners against an attack of Sir John Holker, Attorney-General at that time, who accused them of feeding their bull-pups on the best cuts from legs of mutton. It was a grotesque charge, as Mr. Burt pointed out, for the northern miners do not keep bulldogs, but whippets. However, the spirited refutation of the slander appears to have created in the minds of some members an impression that Mr. Burt was a doggy man himself. Mr. Broadhurst wrote concerning the time when, in 1880, there were almost continuous all-night sittings: "I had remained in the House till seven o'clock in the morning, when I gave notice to the Whips that I must go home. They urged me to remain another hour or so, but I refused, alleging that my house was entirely unprotected except for my dog, and he would want his breakfast by the time I got home. This statement, duly embroidered, was repeated, with much success, by one of the legal advisers of the Government, gaining a wide circulation, and at each stage receiving many interesting additions. A few days later, when, thanks to the exertions of the Irish Party, all-night sittings were of almost unbroken continuity, Mr. Grant Duff happened to meet Mr. Thomas Burt on the Terrace, and, of course, the obstructionist policy of the Irishmen was the burden of the conversation. Now,

THOMAS BURT

Mr. Grant Duff had heard the dog story, but somehow confused the hero, and ascribed its origin to Mr. Burt. Being a noted dog-fancier and breeder of dogs himself, he naturally alluded to the incident, and remarked : ‘ Yes, Mr. Burt, it is a killing time, but I agree with you that the dogs should not suffer, and I am glad to hear that you insisted upon going home the other morning in order that your bulldog might have his breakfast at his regular hour.’ Only those who know the grave and staid member for Morpeth,” continues Mr. Broadhurst, “ can realize the look of horror which overspread his countenance at the idea of his owning a bulldog. ‘ I don’t know to what you refer, Mr. Duff,’ he exclaimed. ‘ I never owned a dog in my life, and certainly not a bulldog.’ Mr. Grant Duff hurriedly withdrew, with profuse apologies. But the story did not end there. At a later hour in the evening another member was discussing with Mr. Burt the all-absorbing topic of the exhaustion of members and its effect on their health, when Mr. Burt exclaimed : ‘ Yes, and on their minds, too, for Mr. Grant Duff has actually been asking me what time in the morning I retire from Parliament to feed my bulldog ! ’ ”

In an article contributed to the *Fortnightly Review* in 1889 Mr. Burt again expressed his sense of the fair-mindedness of the House of Commons. “ That assembly,” he wrote, “ is, so far as its own members are concerned, thoroughly democratic. It believes in, and practises, equality, and is free alike from condescension and from arrogance. Let a member know in substance what he is talking about—let him talk straight at the House, not up to it, still less down to it—and the House will accord him a fair hearing, and will make fair allowance for his bluntness and inaccuracies of speech. Probably there is no place in the world where social position counts for less than in the British House of Commons.”

LABOUR AND PARLIAMENT

Three years later—in 1892, that is to say—he was seconding Mr. Asquith's resolution of "no confidence" in the Salisbury Government, and in that speech there occurred, as if by accident, a most interesting piece of self-revelation, such as must have been included in the autobiography had it been completed. "I feel," he said, "that something in the nature of an apology is due from me for claiming the attention of the House so early in the new Parliament. I need not say to those who have been members of the House of Commons for many years past that it has not been my habit to needlessly intrude myself upon it. I am not an orator, as is my hon. and learned friend who has just concluded his powerful speech. I am not even a talker. The occasions are few when I would not rather be silent than speak. I always speak with reluctance, and I feel on this occasion more than usual embarrassment and difficulty; not that I have not full confidence in the justice and reasonableness of the amendment that I have risen to second, but because it is exceedingly difficult to speak on that amendment without uttering something that is commonplace and self-evident. I never could talk against time. I always have to imagine that there is some reality in the discussion in which I am engaged."

"There are few members of Parliament," he said in 1883, "who receive more applications to address meetings than I do, and—I say this not to win approval at all, because, perhaps, I deserve censure for it—to ninety-nine out of every hundred applications I send a negative reply."

IV

SUNSHINE AND STORM

Sponsor for Joseph Chamberlain—Labour Members and Labour Legislation—Mr. Chamberlain's Charges—Taking the Unpopular Side—The Afghan War—Great Parliamentary Figures—A Time of Distress and Trouble—The Mischief-Makers—Stoning the Prophets—A Protest.

WHEN JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN was re-elected after having accepted office for the first time one of the two members who accompanied him to the table of the House to take the oath was Thomas Burt. The fact had a special significance. Mr. Burt was an old friend and admirer, but that was not all that was implied. Mr. Chamberlain was himself, in a way, a "Labour man" at that time; also he had more enemies in the House than friends, Minister as he was. They were to be found on both sides. Mr. Burt's sponsorship meant that other conspicuous members had not been too ready to come forward.

There came a time when the member for West Birmingham placed all the Labour members, Mr. Burt included, under his especial ban. He had changed his point of view on labour as well as on most other subjects, and carried his hostility so far as to make the surprising declaration that not one of the Labour members in the House of Commons "had ever initiated or carried through any legislation for the benefit of the working classes, though occasionally they had hindered such legislation." It was not on this specific statement, but on another equally

SUNSHINE AND STORM

devoid of foundation, that Mr. Burt wrote in *The Nineteenth Century*, then the leading monthly review: "This is not a self-evident proposition. No proof is vouchsafed. It is enough, therefore, to deny its correctness."

Between the time when Mr. Burt entered Parliament and the date at which Mr. Chamberlain made his extraordinary charge against the Labour members nearly sixty measures were passed dealing directly or indirectly with labour interests. "Up to 1874," says George Howell, "when Alexander Macdonald and Thomas Burt were returned to Parliament, labour was voiceless in the House of Commons." From that time its voice was potent, not only in the initiation but the repeal of legislation, which, for the greater part of the nineteenth century, was the more important function of the two.

But Thomas Burt was not entirely immersed in Labour politics or in Parliamentary work. His attendance at the sittings of the House of Commons was of a wholly exemplary character, and he became one of those members who, when they rose to speak, occasioned an influx from tea-room, smoking-room, and library. His Parliamentary career was distinguished by many well-marked incidents. He marched up the floor with Charles Bradlaugh when that stalwart champion of free thought first presented himself as member for Northampton, and he stood beside him through all the painful incidents which led up to his recognition as one of the ablest and most earnest and eloquent men in the House. He was, in everything but support of the policy of obstruction, the unfailing ally of the Irish party when it was at the height of its unpopularity, alike in Parliament and in the country. In 1878 he had made a powerful and memorable speech on the subject of the Afghan War. "I have not before taken any part in the debates on foreign affairs," he said. ". . . May I say a few words about the feelings of the

THOMAS BURT

working classes concerning this war? I have never since I came to this House unduly, I hope, arrogated to myself the right of speaking on behalf of the working people. I know the House would resent such a claim put forward by any man—and properly so. Those who are spoken of as working men differ in opinion on most questions, as all other classes differ. . . . It will perhaps be allowed, however, that I have good opportunities of knowing the views of working men, and especially of those in the North of England. I am one of them. When I am not in London these men are my daily associates and companions, and I have with large numbers of them a free and frank interchange of sentiment and opinion. . . . I do not know one of these men who does not strongly condemn this war and the policy that has produced it.”

When speaking, many years later, of these early experiences of Parliament, Mr. Burt said: “Among the great Parliamentary figures of the time were Gladstone, Disraeli, and John Bright, whilst among the men who were coming to the front were Sir William Harcourt, Sir Henry James (afterwards Lord James of Hereford), Mr. Fawcett, and Sir Charles Dilke. Gladstone was by far the greatest Parliamentary orator and debater I have ever heard. John Bright was also a great orator; but the careful preparation which his speeches required made it difficult for him to enter effectively into debate. Nor was Disraeli so ready in debate as Gladstone, but from a literary point of view his carefully prepared speeches were perfection.

“I had the pleasure of hearing Disraeli’s last speech in the House of Commons and his first in the House of Lords. His transfer to the Upper House was very sudden, and an incident connected with it remains very clear in my memory. I had remained in the House later than usual. Nearly everyone had gone. Disraeli walked slowly

SUNSHINE AND STORM

down to the Bar, stood for a moment surveying the House, and then passed out behind the Speaker's Chair to his own private room. It was his farewell of the House. The next morning's papers contained the announcement of his elevation to the peerage. He never returned to the Commons to listen to any debates."

But much as Mr. Burt enjoyed his Parliamentary work, almost constantly productive, and rapidly as he advanced in the esteem of members on both sides of the House of Commons, his life was at that time far from plain-sailing. There had been a great check in the national prosperity. The word "slump" had not then been invented, in the sense in which it has since been employed, but a slump had taken place. The "pitman's happy times" had come to an end. There was slackness and distress throughout the whole country, and a constantly falling rate of wages, diversified by strikes. In the coal-trade there were such reductions that the Northumberland coalowners, afraid of the consequences of a further demand on their part, looked out for relief for themselves in other directions. The Welsh system of payment for coal-hewing suggested itself, and there was an arbitration, presided over by Judge Fairplay, which not only recommended the adoption of the Welsh system, but pronounced in favour of a reduction of 7 per cent. in the standard wage. This was not merely hard luck for the men, but a great surprise. They accepted the new system, and derisively called it "Billy Fairplay"; but there was simmering discontent, taken advantage of by those who are always lying in wait to discredit, and if possible to displace, the workmen's leaders. The character of one of the charges made against Mr. Burt at that time may be discerned from the following portions of a letter written by him, in December 1876, to his "Fellow Workmen":

"I am credibly informed that a statement is being

THOMAS BURT

industriously circulated amongst you to the effect that, when the deputation lately met the employers on the introduction of the Welsh system, I prevented certain members of that deputation from speaking their views to the coalowners. To such an assertion, in whatever shape it may be put, I give a decided and emphatic denial. It is not true. I uttered not a single word that could by any ingenuity be made to bear such a construction. On the contrary, I told the deputation distinctly before we went to the Coal Trade Office that the general practice was for every member to be at perfect liberty to advance any arguments or facts he could, or to put forward anything that occurred to him in the interests of our members. . . . For more than ten years I have had the honour of serving you as a general officer of your Association. I am but human, and in that time I have probably made many mistakes. But this I can honestly say, that I have always been ready to co-operate in the general interest with anyone you have thought fit to elect to serve you on deputations, committees, etc., never allowing mere personal feeling to stand in the way of the general interest of our members. . . .

“I am sorry to have had to make a reference, however brief, to a personal matter, especially at a time when questions of such grave importance, and so deeply affecting your welfare, are before you. Could I be persuaded that it is *merely* personal, and affecting myself only, I would treat it with the contempt it deserves; but I am told by many good and staunch friends of our Association that the lies and misrepresentations about myself and other officers of the Union which are just now being scattered broadcast among you are finding ready credence, even by some good men in the county, and that they are doing much to weaken the Union itself, and thus to inflict injury on the whole of our members. . . . If something

SUNSHINE AND STORM

be not done quickly to gibbet these falsehoods, and to either gag the traducers, slanderers and mischief-mongers, or compel them to prove or withdraw their statements, the time is fast coming, I fear, when no man with a particle of self-respect or a spark of manhood or spirit within him will accept or retain office in our Association."

In those lean times one trouble followed fast on the heels of another. In April 1877 the owners proposed a further reduction of wages. The demand was extravagant, said Mr. Burt, and the manner of it was ill-considered and hasty, but the condition of the coal-trade was such as to forbid the hope that it could be successfully resisted. Against his warnings and advice, the men excitedly called for a strike. They turned on all their leaders at once, refusing to listen to them at meetings, and even stoning them from the platforms. But Mr. Burt was exempted from the worst part of this treatment. As Mr. Welbourne writes: "Others might be stoned and shouted down, but to his condemnation of their folly the men always gave a ready hearing. They forebore to shame the miner whom they had sent up to Westminster, and to whom they voted a salary of £500 a year that he might worthily uphold his new dignity as the miners' member for Morpeth."

Nevertheless, there was some jealousy about his position, and not for the first time. As early as 1872 there were those who were saying that Mr. Burt "had held his situation long enough." In an energetic and indignant letter addressed to the miners of Northumberland he said: "Perhaps I have. If I have held it until I have lost the confidence of the men, I have, indeed, held it too long. . . . I came into the 'situation' with great reluctance," he went on to say, "honestly believing that I was not the kind of man required. I expected difficulties; I expected annoyances

THOMAS BURT

and even personal attacks. In this I have not been disappointed. . . . So far as I am concerned, I tell you honestly that, while I wish to be of service to you to the utmost extent, I do not care, nor have I ever cared, for the 'situation.' If you wish me to remain in it I can only do so on certain conditions. . . . I came to you as a free man, and I can only continue with you as such. (I choose my own company ; I shall correspond with whom I like.) I claim to have, or that I ought to have, some little time to call my own, and this leisure I dispose of in my own way. I shall at all times claim the higher liberty of speaking as I think upon every question. I shall never consent to be the mere tool and mouthpiece of any man or any body of men. What I am convinced is right I shall ever advocate to the best of my ability. What I am convinced is wrong I shall ever oppose. To act otherwise would be to degrade myself, and ultimately to become useless to you."

This was the attitude that he consistently and resolutely maintained throughout his lifetime, and the men understood him, after a fashion. They never lost their belief in his character. In a confused way they recognized the fact that when he seemed to be most opposed to them he was really acting in their interests. In this instance the men followed the advice which he gave to them at a mass meeting on Newcastle Town Moor. The matter in dispute was referred to arbitration, and the arbitrator, Mr. Farrer Herschell (afterwards Lord Herschell), declined to reduce the wages, but decided that, as was the case in Durham, the men should work on alternate Saturdays instead of only five days a week.

This Herschell award was no settlement. In two months' time—that is, in October 1877—the owners again determined on a reduction, the demand being followed by what the men called a lock-out and the owners a strike.

SUNSHINE AND STORM

The miners, on Mr. Burt's advice, offered arbitration, but the owners mistook this for an admission that the funds of the Union were too low to permit of anything but the acceptance of their terms. The result was a stoppage, commencing at Christmas. After a severe fight, attended by much privation, the men were defeated, at a cost to the Union of not less than £50,000. In a letter widely commented upon by the Press at the time Mr. Burt pointed out that all the differences between employers and workmen had for several years past been adjusted by conciliation and arbitration; that this principle had been severely tested at a most critical period in the Northumberland coal-trade; and that the miners had in every case, without exception, accepted and carried out the award of the umpires. The coalowners, he said, had declined the offer of arbitration in this instance without making any proposal of their own to bring the difficulty to a peaceful termination. "Apart from the special organs of the coal-trade," he wrote at the termination of the dispute, "the universal opinion of the Press was that the employers had committed a grave mistake of policy in departing from the system which had so long been in operation, and that they, and not the miners, were responsible for the conflict and for the evils that might follow in its train."

The greatest evil that was to be apprehended was the breakdown of the Joint Committee system, and this he bent all the energies of his mind to prevent. The men, in sullen and angry mood, were for biding their time to strike back. Mr. Burt addressed them in these terms at the close of an extended recapitulation of the facts: "In one respect the lock-out has been of a model character throughout. There probably never was a trade dispute on such a large scale, and involving so much suffering, conducted with so much moderation and unfailing good temper by the great bulk of the men concerned. Great

THOMAS BURT

credit is due to the miners on that ground. On the other hand, it is but fair to admit that the owners, beyond having been unusually stiff and exacting in enforcing their demand without mitigation, have done nothing to embitter the conflict. Had a similar, or even a larger, reduction taken place as the result of an inquiry, no resentment would have been felt; but having been exacted by force, a feeling in favour of retaliation has been generated, and there will be a desire to strike back again on the first opportunity. However natural that feeling may be, I think it is greatly to be deprecated. Nothing but misery and disaster could result from it. The coal-trade of the district cannot afford to be trifled with in any such way. Confidence, harmony, and co-operation are indispensable to its future existence. In the interests of peace it is therefore much to be regretted that a sliding scale has not been adopted. Such a system is just in principle, and by no means its slightest recommendation is that it gives some guarantee against the repetition of industrial conflicts such as that through which we have just passed."

Ultimately a sliding scale was adopted, with no very satisfactory consequences. Meanwhile, Mr. Burt's popularity had been subjected to the severest possible strain. That was a matter about which he did not concern himself so long as he could keep the men on the path that he had marked out for them. In this he succeeded so well that peace was restored for a whole decade. "It is not a man's main business in life to be popular," he said in a House of Commons speech, amid a rattle of approving cheers.

ENTERS MR. GLADSTONE'S GOVERNMENT

Progress in "The House"—Style—Love of the Poets—Seconding the Motion of "No Confidence"—The General Election of 1892—Correspondence with Mr. Gladstone—Mr. Burt a Member of the Government—The Death of Alexander Macdonald—Labour Questions in Parliament—The Miners' Federation.

WHILST HE WAS ceaselessly engaged in shepherding the best interests of the class to which he belonged, and in patiently and tolerantly defending himself against those who professed to be its more competent advisers, Thomas Burt was gradually but surely rising in the esteem of the House of Commons. He always spoke reluctantly, but with effect, with excellent taste, and with a perfect understanding of the temper of his audience. His speeches were particularly good to listen to, and they read well. There were no purple patches. He was invariably self-restrained. He made no pretence of oratory, but he always charmed and interested those who listened to him. His manner was genuinely individual, and he had a rich, gentle humour of his own, of which one of the most quotable examples is a passage in the speech in which, in behalf of the Opposition, he moved the rejection of Mr. Balfour's Licensing Bill. "I have it from the Archbishop of Canterbury," he said, "that there is apparently a great rivalry between the Church and the Trade as to which of them rear the most virtuous families. The Archbishop, quoting from the *Licensed Victuallers' Annual*, said that they actually

THOMAS BURT

declared—deliberately affirmed—that it is a matter of statistical proof that the publicans' families turned out very much better than the clergymen's." Before the laughter occasioned by this sally had subsided there was a gentle gesture of deprecation. Then, "I would just warn my publican friends," he said, "that it does not necessarily follow that the public-house is a better school of morals than the Church. . . . We are all interested in this question," he added, "and I hope that this wholesome rivalry in the rearing of virtuous families will go on with moderation and without acrimony."

It is said that Lord Morley once put to Mr. Burt a question almost identical with that which the surprised editor of the *Edinburgh Review* addressed to Macaulay: "Where did you pick up that style?" There was here, no doubt, a reference to articles in the *Reviews* as well as to speeches in the House of Commons, for Mr. Burt was frequently requested to contribute to *The Nineteenth Century* and its competing publications, and sometimes he complied. In conversation he usually spoke of Ruskin as the greatest of his masters, but he still more constantly proclaimed his indebtedness to the poets. We have seen what he says on that subject in the autobiographical portion of this volume. In a recent public speech Sir A. H. D. Acland told how Mr. Burt used to recite passages from Wordsworth to his friends in the corridor near the House of Commons library. It was a mutual love and admiration of Wordsworth which first brought Viscount Grey into close intimacy with him. On the voyage to South Africa with Mrs. Burt, when they went out to see two of their sons, he kept a large group of fellow-passengers deeply interested during a recital of the rather formidable "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality."

But familiarity neither with Ruskin's prose nor Wordsworth's verse, nor both together, accounted solely, or

ENTERS MR. GLADSTONE'S GOVERNMENT

even in the main, for Thomas Burt's style. It grew out of himself, under these and many other fostering influences. The style was the man. He had no memory of making any effort to acquire it, though he once said: "Almost from the beginning of my serious reading I was attracted by style. That seemed to be an instinct with me." "I have wondered," he remarked to an interviewer, "whether it may not have been in my mother's beautiful reading aloud that I first got a regard for the music of words."

This has been a digression, necessary, however, as throwing a useful sidelight on the subject of this book. His Parliamentary gifts were acknowledged in a manner particularly noteworthy when, in 1892, "with the general consent of the party and of public opinion," as Mr. Cox Meech says, he was selected to second Mr. Asquith's motion of want of confidence in the Conservative Government. The speech was admittedly one of great force, admirable for its purpose, and excellent in form. It was followed by a debate in which many other notable speeches were made, and then by a vote which brought the Salisbury Administration to an end.

The General Election which produced this result had proved somewhat disappointing to Liberal hopes. Mr. Gladstone had expected a majority at least three times as large as that which was actually returned to support him. His own majority in Midlothian was reduced from thousands to hundreds. Writing to the Northumberland miners in his Monthly Circular, from which an interesting and valuable book of essays on Labour questions might be compiled, Mr. Burt said: "Mr. Broadhurst, I regret to say, lost his seat for West Nottingham. His defeat was no doubt due to his opposition to the Eight Hours Mines Bill. At least two direct miners' representatives who would have made capital members failed to obtain votes enough where the miners are in favour of the Bill. Many

THOMAS BURT

so-called Labour candidates were defeated, some of them receiving very few votes, and only succeeding in helping Tories to the House of Commons. . . . Some of these were in no sense Labour candidates," he added.

Before the change of Administration, there followed on the Conservative defeat in the House of Commons the correspondence here given :

1, CARLTON GARDENS,
August 17, '92.

Secret.

DEAR MR. BURT,

I have much pleasure in proposing to you that you should accept the appointment of Secretary to the Board of Trade under the new Administration.

This proposal has the sanction of Mr. Mundella, the President.

And it is one which I have particular pleasure in submitting to you on account of the particular and warm respect which I, in common with all who know you, have ever felt for that high character and for the many excellent qualities which have recommended you for so long a time to public confidence and esteem.

Believe me always,

Sincerely yours,

W. E. GLADSTONE.

REFORM CLUB,
August 18th, 1892.

MY DEAR MR. GLADSTONE,

I have to acknowledge with warm thanks your offer of the Secretaryship of the Board of Trade. The exceedingly kind—too favourable—terms in which you speak of me enhance the value of the offer. I shall indeed esteem it a great honour to be associated with a Government of which you are the chief.

There is one difficulty that somewhat embarrasses me, which you will perhaps pardon me for mentioning. I should not feel free to take any place that would compel me to entirely sever my connection with the Labour movement. For more than twenty-seven years I have been General Secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association. Recently the Secretaryship has made no great demands upon my time, and my friends will no doubt at once take steps to relieve me of the duties altogether. I trust, however, that I may still in cases of emergency be able to consult with and advise them.

ENTERS MR. GLADSTONE'S GOVERNMENT

The Board of Trade has some attraction to me inasmuch as I should be brought into close contact with matters having a direct bearing upon the interests of labour. I hope the new Government will be disposed to further develop the Labour Bureau Department which was inaugurated by Mr. Mundella. Should you see no insurmountable obstacles in the points I have mentioned, I shall be prepared gratefully to accept the appointment, and shall do my best to discharge faithfully in the public interest the duties thrown upon me.

I am, dear Mr. Gladstone,
Yours with great esteem,
T. BURT.

1, CARLTON GARDENS,
August 19, '92.

MY DEAR MR. BURT,

After consultation with Mr. Mundella and other friends, I am of opinion that the difficulty named by you need not impede you taking office.

It is evident that your Secretaryship will have to be dropped, both as matter of official necessity, and because your holding it would tend to impair your influence as an official man in other directions.

But this need not preclude their repairing to you for advice as an experienced and trusted confidential adviser, in cases where the necessity is felt for it: and I am quite sure that you would give such advice in a spirit of honourable and strict impartiality as between competing interests.

The development of the Labour Bureau and the prosecution of the interests connected with it will engage the attention of the Government, and open a long and broad perspective, and I am very glad that your place at the Board of Trade will supply you with a post of influence where your experience and ability may be made directly serviceable for purposes which you have so much at heart.

Believe me,
With much regard,
Faithfully yours,
W. E. GLADSTONE.

In his Monthly Circular for September Mr. Burt said to the members of his Association, under the head of "Personal": "You will doubtless have learned that I have been offered and have accepted the post of Parlia-

THOMAS BURT

mentary Secretary to the Board of Trade. . . . I trust that during my tenure of office I may be able to do something for Labour and for the public welfare. I especially hope to aid in developing and perfecting the Labour Department of the Board of Trade.

“My main difficulty in accepting office had reference to my connection with the Labour movement. Long ago I resolved to accept no position that would necessitate my severance from that movement. The Secretaryship of your Union was especially dear to me. It is more than twenty-seven years since, at your call, I left the coal-face to take that place. These years have brought many changes. They have tested your adhesion to union principles, to each other, and to those whom you have selected to represent you. On the whole, you have thoroughly stood the test. Speaking for myself, I can confidently say that, despite temporary and sectional misrepresentation, you have, under the severest strain, proved loyal, considerate, and true to your officials and representatives. . . .

“So long as I am a member of the Government I shall not require the salary you have paid me as Secretary.”

Between the member for Morpeth and the great statesman who now selected him for office there had long been a personal relationship which was based on admiration on both sides. Speaking in the House of Commons in March 1882, on a motion proposing a large extension of the franchise, Mr. Gladstone said: “It is greatly to be desired that there should be some enlarged representation of Labour in the House. We have at present among us only two members whom we can call, in the strictest sense, representatives of Labour. I ask the House whether the specimens before us, in the member for Stoke and the member for Morpeth—I ask whether these two specimens are not such as to lead us to desire that extension. . . .

ENTERS MR. GLADSTONE'S GOVERNMENT

Nothing contributes more to the union of all classes," he went on to say, "to the strengthening of the Constitution, to making the nation one in heart and sentiment, and thoroughly attaching the people to their country, than thus to open the doors of the House of Commons to the representatives of the people."

The member for Stoke was Mr. Henry Broadhurst, the first workman Privy Councillor. Alexander Macdonald died in the following year, Mr. Burt succeeding him as President of the Miners' National Union. The two men had been close and affectionate comrades, and the hand of the survivor may be detected in the following motion of sympathy, dated November 19, 1881:

That we, the delegates of the Northumberland Miners' Association, have heard with deep sorrow of the death of Mr. Macdonald, and desire to place on record our high sense of the invaluable services rendered by him for more than thirty years to the miners of the United Kingdom. Many of us having intimately known and worked with him for many years had opportunity of seeing constant evidence of his great zeal, his singular energy and ability, and the spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice which always marked his services to the miners and to the cause of progress and human improvement and elevation. We trust and believe that his name will live for many generations in the hearts of those whom he has served so long, so faithfully, and so well. To the sorrowing relatives in this, their hour of trouble and grief, we wish to convey our sincere sympathy and condolence.

Mr. Burt's faithful and indefatigable colleague had lived long enough to witness the passing of a measure which to some extent realized his hopes concerning the compensation of workmen for injuries suffered in the course of their daily toil. In 1877 Macdonald introduced a Bill which would have abolished the "doctrine of common employment," a piece of "Judge-made law" which held the employer scatheless if one of his workmen had been the cause of injury or death to another. This measure, though it had been before a Select Committee which

THOMAS BURT

partially endorsed its proposals, was among the "slaughtered innocents" of that Parliamentary session. The experience was repeated in the following year; but in 1880 there was a change of Government, and what had been a private Bill was brought into the House as a Ministerial measure and passed into law. It provided what George Howell calls a clumsy and wordy way of getting rid of the doctrine of common employment, and there were serious limitations as to liability; but it also provided a solid basis for much subsequent legislation, extending up to, and over, the end of the century, in all of which Mr. Burt, with a new and indomitable colleague in Henry Broadhurst, took a share which entitles him to the permanent gratitude of the working people of England. "In spite of all the changing fashions in Labour representation, and the new types of Labour members that have been evolved in recent years," said an authoritative newspaper at a much later date, "the working classes in this country have never had a better or a more honest champion than Thomas Burt."

In his *Political Life of W. E. Gladstone*, the late E. J. Milliken wrote of the first session of the new Parliament: "Next to Home Rule, the Labour question in its various phases occupied perhaps the largest share of public attention. The problems involved in the relations between Capital and Labour became increasingly prominent and puzzling. . . . Agricultural depression and Bimetallism were subjects of much public controversy, but Labour questions, as they were called—the relations of Labour and Capital, Individualism *versus* Collectivism, State Socialism, the New Unionism—these were the topics which most moved the masses, perturbed the classes, and occupied the attention of ambitious politicians."

As a politician Mr. Burt was not ambitious, but these were the topics with which he found himself very closely

ENTERS MR. GLADSTONE'S GOVERNMENT

engaged, alike in the House of Commons and in connection with the miners of the north. It was at this time that Mr. Chamberlain wrote the article describing the Conservatives as the true friends of the working class, to which Mr. Burt made the already quoted reply, in which, politely but decisively, he gave what might be not incorrectly described as the *lie-direct* to the whilom Radical with whom he had walked up to the Speaker's table twelve years before.

George Howell gives a list of nineteen measures directly or indirectly affecting labour which were introduced into the House of Commons during Mr. Burt's Secretaryship of the Board of Trade. Some of these were of high importance, as Mr. Howell's own Shipping Bill and his Bill for the exemption of the Provident Funds of trade unions from income-tax, Sir John Lubbock's Shop Hours Regulation Bill, the Bill dealing with the hours of labour of railway servants, the measure preventing interference with checkweighmen at collieries (an old and heavy grievance), and the Factory and Workshops Amendment Act. There was nothing showy in all this. It just meant strenuous work for the Department and its representatives, the hardest worked of whom was Thomas Burt.

Meantime, matters of importance in the north were claiming a share of attention. The Northumberland pit-men had entirely changed their attitude to the Miners' Federation. They had opposed it stoutly for several years, and the Federation had sent down missionaries to make speeches and deliver lectures among them. Eventually, in June 1893, Mr. Ralph Young, the Secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association, wrote to the Federation Secretary : " I beg to inform you that we have just taken a ballot vote of our members on the following question, viz. : ' Are you in favour of joining the Miners' Federation ? ' with the result that it has been decided

THOMAS BURT

to join." There was a secession before long ; but again, in 1907, there was another vote, overwhelmingly in favour of again taking up membership, and on that occasion Mr. Burt wrote in his Monthly Circular :

" One of the most important events to us locally during the month was the vote of our members to join the Miners' Federation. The figures, as you know, were :

For joining	..	..	..	16,208
Against	..	..	..	3,613
Majority	..	..	..	12,595

" I am glad the majority was so decisive. Once before we came to a similar decision, though by a majority much smaller. I hope that now we shall exhibit more of our usual steadiness, and shall act with more loyalty to the Federation than we did on the occasion to which I have referred. There is no reason why, with the judgment and good feeling which may be anticipated, our adhesion to the Federation may not be wholly advantageous, both to our own district and to the great organization which we are about to join.

" It has been supposed, and sometimes publicly stated—usually anonymously and always by ill-informed writers—that the officials of your Union have always been bitterly hostile to the Federation. No well-informed person, certainly no one who has attended our Council meetings, could reasonably entertain that delusion. Speaking for myself, I have always, as an ardent trade-unionist, favoured combination on the widest possible basis. Of course, it is essential to any effective union, of whatever kind, that there should be general identity of interest as well as agreement on fundamental principles. In the early days of the Miners' Federation there were, as everybody knows, important differences of principle, of method, and of policy which made our complete union with that body

ENTERS MR. GLADSTONE'S GOVERNMENT

difficult, if not wholly impracticable. These points need not now be dwelt upon ; indeed, it is scarcely necessary to mention them. They are well known to all who have intelligently watched the respective associations. It may be confidently asserted that the personal feelings or the individual opinions of your officials had nothing to do with the subject. There has never been other than harmony, good feeling, and readiness to work together in the general interest of our workers between us and the leading men of the Miners' Federation.

“ As regards other differences, arising from local usages and the broader questions of principle, policy, and method, with time and free discussion some of the most pronounced of these have diminished or entirely disappeared.”

Mr. Burt had at length come into a region of calm after many tempests, in none of which had there been a loss of that serenity of spirit which perhaps was the most striking, and certainly the most persistent, of the ingredients of a remarkable character.

VI

SOCIALISM AND LABOUR

“Men on the Make”—Socialistic Agitation—Fomenting Strikes—The New Unionism—Mr. Burt as President of the Trade Union Congress—George Jacob Holyoake on Mr. Burt—A Piece of Advice to Socialists—The Labour Party Constitution—A Notable Recognition by the Labour Parties.

IT IS NECESSARY at this point to glance backward over a few years.

In all workmen's organizations there is invariably some simmering discontent and some small knot of pushing individuals who strive to make use of it for their own advantage. In the language of the London workman, these are “men on the make.” Mr. Burt's contribution to the *Shipping World* refers very mildly and casually to the strike of 1887; but the fact is that in connection with that strike he had to defend himself against both oratorical and physical violence. He confessed to the House of Commons at a later time that there had been a meeting from which he hardly expected to escape with his life.

Such was the change that had taken place among a large body of the Northumberland miners since 1881, when the following incident was recorded by the local newspapers :

Mr. Burt's visit to Cambois on Wednesday was characterized by the most enthusiastic scenes. Flags were flying from almost every house in the colliery. As soon as the conveyance arrived which contained Mr. Burt and several members of his family, the horses were taken out of the shafts and the conveyance was drawn

SOCIALISM AND LABOUR

through the streets by a number of young men amid the cheers of the populace.

The discontent and dissatisfaction were now so unequivocal that the whole of the officers of the Northumberland Union sent in their resignations. At this form of protest against their unreason the men began to take thought. The resignations were not accepted, and after a seventeen weeks' struggle the miners went back to work at a reduction of $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. and a cost of £40,000 to the Union funds.

There had been for some years a great deal of Socialistic agitation among the miners of the north. It began before the strike, or lock-out, of 1877. The movement was from the outside, and undoubtedly had pernicious consequences. Matthew Tate, a Northumbrian miner who wrote great quantities of topical verse, stated the case quite accurately in this way :

Just then some men from London
Came down our men to teach ;
But between us and our leaders
They wider made the breach.
They didn't bring a coin to help
To aid us in our cause ;
But yet some chose to greet these men
With thunders of applause.

There is no intention here of discussing Socialism as a policy. What, one may assume, will not be denied is that, among the miners at any rate, it began as a movement antagonistic to the trade unions and their leaders. In the course of no very long time it converged into "the New Unionism." In the later 'seventies of the last century it was so new, indeed, that Keir Hardie was, by repute, Secretary of the Ayrshire Miners' Union when there was no Ayrshire Miners' Union in existence. The Socialistic leaven was introduced into Durham as well

THOMAS BURT

as into Northumberland. John Wilson, the leader of the Durham miners, for many years in close and affectionate association with Mr. Burt in the House of Commons, wrote, what was equally true of both counties, that: "The next difficulty of the (Durham) Council was the unconstitutional district meetings which were held. At these the wildest statements were made, and as a consequence the minds of the members became unsettled, and disunion followed." Some years before the time thus referred to, William Crawford, Mr. Wilson's predecessor, declined to attend a miners' meeting which was to be addressed by some of the Socialists who had attacked Mr. Burt. He was a man with an outspoken style, and he wrote: "Mr. Burt as a public man ought to be subject to fair criticism. To this I am quite sure he would not object, but would rather desire it. But I question whether my right position is to appear on a platform with anyone who has gone outside of fair criticism to slander and defame by lies the character of a man whom I highly respect. The most villainous and cowardly imputations have been made against Mr. Burt by some who are on the bill to take part in to-day's meeting." This will indicate sufficiently the attitude of the New Unionists at that time to the foremost of the old leaders of trade unionism.

Mr. Burt simply pursued his own way, with very occasional protests. The New Unionists fomented strikes as a means of demonstrating their power. Here is what is said by Mr. Keir Hardie's biographer of the time when an Ayrshire Miners' Union had actually been formed: "It took nearly a year to get the organization together, and by the beginning of August 1881 a demand was made for a 10 per cent. increase of wages. Ere nightfall a miracle had been accomplished. For the first time in its history there was a stoppage, nearly complete, in the Ayrshire

SOCIALISM AND LABOUR

mining industry." The spirit of this is wholly alien to the character of Mr. Burt's mind. The main object of his life was to prevent strikes, not to originate them. "As the fight went on from week to week," says the writer just quoted, "the winter came as an ally to the coalowners . . . and for the sake of the bairns the men went back to work."

Mr. Burt's policy made infinite trouble for him for the time being, but ultimately justified itself in the most noble way. He was in a position to say, in 1908, concerning general strikes in the county: "It is twenty-one years since we had any conflict of the kind. For thirty-five years we have scarcely ever had any local or sectional strikes." He had, in fact, established machinery for the permanent preservation of peace in the Northumberland coal-field.

His general attitude towards Socialism was tolerant, but inflexible. Neither he nor Mr. Charles Fenwick, who became his Parliamentary colleague in the representation of the miners of Northumberland, would yield in the slightest degree to the demand that they should place themselves under the orders of the new Labour party. They valued their independence above every other possession, one consequence being that Mr. Keir Hardie and his associates determined on their extermination as leaders of the working class. The great attempt to "put them in their place" was to be made at the Trades Union Congress held in Newcastle in 1891. The New Unionism was present for the first time in full force. It was represented by strong men like John Ward, Will Thorne, Keir Hardie, and "Comrade Quelch the Tyrant Queller." Mr. Burt was President of the Congress as the leading trade-unionist in the district in which it was held, and there speedily manifested itself a tumultuous desire to make his position intolerable. This determination was defeated in the most

THOMAS BURT

remarkable, and often amusing, way. The Socialists had wholly mistaken their man. Notwithstanding many disorderly scenes and constant attempts to dispute his authority, Thomas Burt dominated the proceedings from first to last, and brought them to an end amid thunders of approbation, even from those who had been accustomed to describe him as "a back number."

George Jacob Holyoake, whose knowledge of all kinds of public assemblies was probably unique, wrote of the personal triumph of the President of the Congress in these words :

During the six days of discussion he stilled the wildest tempests, regulated the most confused debate, made every point of order lucid, arrested the impetuous, reconciled the offended, and decided points with promptness and fairness. Wit, humour, common-sense, and apt illustration delighted the delegates, won their confidence and admiration, maintained order, and advanced business in a way no Speaker of the House of Commons could excel. Such courtesy and decision, such union of deference and authority, had never been seen in a Trade Union chair before—and not often elsewhere. No one imagined that so much gentleness of manner, natural to Mr. Burt, co-existed with so much judicial strength.

"Let me pay my respects to the party called Socialists," said Mr. Burt, in responding to a unanimous vote of thanks for his conduct in the chair. "I do not know whether they accept that name." There was a shout of assent, and he continued : "I observe that they accept it. Well, perhaps some of them have discovered that I am myself much more a Socialist than they imagined. But I have had a little bit of experience in my time as to what is practicable and what is not, and what it is best to deal with for the time being. Let us all make our ideal as high as we like, and keep it in front of us, and not be satisfied until it is attained, but in the meantime let us get what we can."

To the Socialists, then in a defiant temper, such rare

SOCIALISM AND LABOUR

ability and so much fairness and candour were qualities that were unanticipated and surprising. Doubtless, also, they were a valuable lesson, for there has never since been the same wildness of the colt at any Trades Union Congress, though, on occasion, we have seen something of the same kind in Parliament. What was meant by being "more of a Socialist" than some of the trade union delegates imagined found its explanation some years later in a speech at Bedlington, where Mr. Burt had first been formally requested to become a Parliamentary candidate. The place was one for which he had a real affection. "It was at Bedlington Church," he said, in a half-humorous and wholly touching interlude, "that I was married, and as Mrs. Burt is not here, it is not to curry favour with her that I say deliberately that that was the very best day's work of my life. . . . You will be saying," he remarked a little later, "'Oh, Mr. Burt is a Socialist!' Well, I don't know about that until I get a definition. There is no shadow of doubt, however, that very much of our legislation during the last three-quarters of a century has had a certain touch of Socialism in it, starting with the great Poor Law Act of 1830 or 1832; and, to give other illustrations, the provision of meals for children, the Workmen's Compensation Act, and schemes for Old Age Pensions."

In regard to the pressure to which he had been subjected in connection with the Constitution of the new Labour party in the House of Commons, he made in the same speech this definite and conclusive statement: "It has been said that men like myself, who have adhered to the Liberal party through good and through evil report, are simply the slaves of the party Whips. That is a very great delusion. I have never been asked, and if I had been asked I would never have consented, to give a political pledge to support any political party. If there was one

THOMAS BURT

man for whom during a long period I entertained admiration, affection, and reverence it was that great and good man, William Ewart Gladstone; but more than once I voted against Mr. Gladstone's views—not without considerable hesitation, I can assure you, because I had great confidence in his judgment and experience. I merely mention this to convey to anyone who may take an interest in it here or hereafter that if I did not always follow Mr. Gladstone I am not likely to follow the leader of any other party, by whatever name it may go." And in that position he remained, to the end of his Parliamentary career, immovable.

It was an attitude of mind which could be maintained only at the cost of financial sacrifice. When Thomas Burt and Charles Fenwick declined, with emphasis, to sign the Constitution of the Labour party the act was a refusal of the salary that was then paid to members of Parliament who followed the opposite course. Mr. Fenwick was the greater sufferer, for he was ousted from the position of Secretary to the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress. To Mr. Burt a salary was never a matter of more than very minor importance. It may be confidently affirmed that in this instance it was at no time the subject of serious thought.

There was no subsequent *rapprochement*, but the Labour party formally buried its hatchet in 1913. On May 5th of that year Mr. Burt was honoured by the special and unanimous recognition of the whole of the Labour groups. "Rarely, if ever," said the *Daily Citizen*, a representative Labour paper of that day, "has a more personal tribute been offered to a British public man than that of which the Right Hon. Thomas Burt, M.P., was the recipient from the forces of organized Labour." There was a complimentary dinner in the Strangers' Dining-Room of the House of Commons, the hosts being the Parliamentary

SOCIALISM AND LABOUR

Labour party and the Joint Board of the Labour movement, representing the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, the management Committee of the General Federation of Trade Unions, and the Executive of the Labour party. No representative Labour man was absent on this occasion for any other reason than inability to attend. The Chairman, Mr. Arthur Henderson, was supported by such men as Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden, Will Crooks, and C. W. Bowerman. "There was no failure," said the *Daily Citizen*, "to recognize the fact that in honouring Mr. Burt—whose friend and colleague, Mr. Fenwick, was bracketed with him—the various Labour organizations were honouring the cause of Labour itself."

"I appreciate your kindness in making me your guest this evening," said Mr. Burt, "all the more because, as has been generally and delicately hinted, there are differences of opinion. . . . Somebody," he said later in his speech—"I think it was Coleridge—said that every man was born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian. Nearly everyone has a dominant feature or quality in his intellect, either the logical and practical or the poetical and ideal. Well, *I was born a trade-unionist.*"

VII

CONVERSATIONS WITH MR. GLADSTONE AND OTHERS.

Autobiographical Sketches—Mr. Gladstone—A Sick-bed Interview—
A Conversation with the "G. O. M."—The Manners of Parliament—
Chamberlain's Cleverness—Lord Rosebery and the Labour Leaders
—The Late Lord Chaplin and Mr. Gladstone—A Gladstone Anecdote
—John Morley on Pensions—A Garden-Party at Downing Street.

MR. BURT'S FIRST MEETING with Mr. Gladstone took place in 1873. The circumstances were remarkable. A deputation of miners from Northumberland was to interview the Prime Minister on labour questions which had a distinct political bearing; but Mr. Gladstone was confined to the house, and even to his bed, by illness. What was to be done in such a case? The great statesman settled the matter for himself. Taking the view that it must be costly and inconvenient for a number of working men to return to the north and then to come back to London at time a more suitable to himself, he rose from his sick-bed, received the deputation, and sent it back contented and happy, each man to tell the story to his mates.

A Gladstone enthusiast from his early manhood, Mr. Burt never weakened in his admiration for his distinguished political leader. In the course of a speech at Devizes, ten years after his first interview, he said: "In the long roll of eminent leading statesmen that have

CONVERSATIONS WITH MR. GLADSTONE

made this country famous we have never had the equal of Mr. Gladstone, taking him all round. We have had, perhaps, his equal for oratorical power; we may have had—but I don't believe it—his equal as a debater; we may have had his equal as an administrator and law-maker; but we have never had a man who was his equal as orator, debater, administrator, and great constructive statesman. Above all, we have never had a man who has been so deep, so wide, in his sympathy with the great masses of the people."

It is significant of this eager but enduring admiration, amounting almost to a passion, that most of the detached autobiographic notes which Mr. Burt left behind him had Mr. Gladstone for their subject. There is, first of all, the record of a conversation which took place at the house of the late Lord Northbourne, then the Hon. Walter James, member for Gateshead, on March 19, 1887.

"The party was a small one," Mr. Burt wrote, "consisting of Mr. and Mrs. James, Mr. and Mrs. W. E. Gladstone, Professor Stuart, M.P., and myself. I sat next to Mr. Gladstone at the dinner-table, and had a long conversation with him. The Right Hon. gentleman was, as usual, very lively. On the previous night he had delivered in the House of Commons a great speech, of more than an hour's duration, on the Irish Crimes Bill, or, rather, on the claim of the Government for the whole time of the House for the discussion of that Bill. That speech had, he said, tired him very much. Mrs. Gladstone, addressing me, said: 'Did you not think, Mr. Burt, that my husband's voice was particularly strong last night?' 'Yes, I did indeed,' I responded. 'Was it not remarkable?' persisted Mrs. Gladstone. 'Really, my dear,' humorously remarked Mr. Gladstone, 'you ought to have been quite satisfied with Mr. Burt's reply.'

THOMAS BURT

When you use the word "remarkable" you excite suspicion. You remind me of an old friend of mine who had an unfortunate impediment in his speech. He consulted an eminent specialist, who, it was said, had cured him. I met my friend some time after this, and, accosting me, he said: "Well, G—G—G—lad—s—s—stone, I'm delighted to s—see you. Since we m—m—met last I have b—been under Dr. — and he's c—c—completely c—c—cured me of my st—st—stammer." Of course,' continued Mr. Gladstone, 'what could I do but congratulate my friend on his cure, though the evidence of it was not altogether conclusive?' 'But, sir,' I observed, 'your voice was really good last night, and a friend who sat beside me while you were speaking remarked that it was wonderful how well sustained and clear were your tones, and how strong you seemed to be. I am not comparing your voice with what that marvellous organ was twenty years ago, when I first heard it, but with the last two or three years.' 'There,' responded Mr. Gladstone, 'I think you are right. Well, I have great reason to be thankful for the amount of strength that is left me. In my youth I was not strong. That I have been able to keep so well and to do so much is due largely to my having observed the laws of health, especially as regards exercise and sleep. There's Mr. Bright, now. Naturally, I think, he's a stronger man than I am. When I first became intimately acquainted with him he was nearly always ailing. After I learned his habits I told him he had no right to be well. He violated nearly every law of health. He sat in close, ill-ventilated rooms, took little or no exercise, and did nothing to keep himself well. I told him that, at the very beginning of my public life, I trained myself to sleep soundly. I go to bed determined to sleep. I banish public questions, all cares and anxieties, from my mind,

CONVERSATIONS WITH MR. GLADSTONE

and resolutely set myself to do one thing—to sleep. Mr. Bright replied that he thought of his speeches in bed—of those he had delivered and of those he had yet to deliver.’

“Speaking further on this subject, Mr. Gladstone said he had induced Mr. Bright, not without difficulty, to consult his own medical adviser, Sir Andrew Clarke. When Mr. Bright went to see Sir Andrew, the latter said : ‘I am delighted to see you, Mr. Bright ; but to what do I owe the honour of this visit ?’ ‘To Mr. Gladstone,’ replied Mr. Bright. ‘He will let me have no peace till I consult you about my health.’ Acting on Dr. Clarke’s instructions, Mr. Bright’s health greatly improved afterwards.

“Mr. Gladstone spoke of his distinguished friend and former colleague with great kindness and affection. He said he should always feel the utmost admiration for Mr. Bright’s character and services. Then he added, with deep feeling : ‘The most painful thing to me in our recent politics has been Mr. Bright’s attitude.’

“Mr. Chamberlain’s name was mentioned, but it was very notable that Mr. Gladstone was disinclined to say much on that subject. ‘Did you not think, sir,’ queried Professor Stuart, ‘that Mr. Chamberlain’s speech last night was very clever ?’ ‘Undoubtedly,’ responded Mr. Gladstone. ‘But when did Mr. Chamberlain ever do anything that was not clever ?’ Then he quickly changed the topic.

“During the evening the advantages of the study of modern languages was mentioned. Mr. Gladstone said he could not understand why German was preferred to Italian. For the middle classes and for commercial life the former was, he admitted, the better ; but for the making of the scholar and the gentleman Italian was, he contended, greatly superior. ‘In Italian you

THOMAS BURT

have the connecting link—the continuity of the old civilization into the new.’

* * * * *

“ On Saturday, June 30, 1888, I dined, on the invitation of Lord Rosebery, at the Trafalgar Hotel, Greenwich. Present were Lord Rosebery, Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Morley, Mr. Broadhurst, Mr. Fenwick, Mr. Crawford, Mr. Howell, Mr. Rowlands, Mr. Pickard, Mr. Cremer (all M.P.’s), and myself. I sat between Lord Rosebery and Mr. Morley, Mr. Gladstone sitting opposite, between Mr. Broadhurst and Mr. Crawford. Mr. Gladstone was, as usual, full of vigour and vivacity. In his seventy-ninth year, he was the most lively man present. He had that afternoon delivered a speech an hour long at Hampstead. During the week he had spoken several times in the House of Commons, two of his speeches having been of considerable length.

“ The conversation was general, and some of it of public interest. Mr. Gladstone remarked that the manners of Parliament had improved as compared with his youth, instancing O’Connell’s reference to Disraeli as ‘ a direct descendant of the impenitent thief,’ and Lord Brougham’s attack on a statesman, in the course of which he called his opponent a liar, and declared that, but for his cowardice, he would have been an assassin. ‘ We hear nothing so atrocious as that nowadays,’ said Mr. Gladstone. Lord Rosebery said quietly to me that, considering the foul and vulgar attacks upon Mr. Gladstone himself, it was very generous of him to say that our Parliamentary manners were improving. Then aloud he said, addressing Mr. Gladstone: ‘ And you really think that House of Commons manners are improving?’ ‘ Undoubtedly,’ replied Mr. Gladstone. ‘ Has the improvement extended so far as Sleaford?’ queried his lordship. ‘ Well,’ said

CONVERSATIONS WITH MR. GLADSTONE

Mr. Gladstone, 'I have no objection to such attacks as the member for Sleaford indulges in.' 'No, indeed, you have no need to care, for you scored heavily against the hon. member,' responded Lord Rosebery. 'Besides,' said Mr. Gladstone, 'you do not know what provocation I gave. I complimented Mr. Chaplin on his maiden speech, now many years ago, and I think he has never forgiven me.'

"In explanation of the foregoing, it is necessary to mention an incident that had occurred in the House of Commons a few days before. Mr. Chaplin, member for Sleaford, had made a violent attack on Mr. Gladstone. He alleged certain gross inconsistencies of statement, sarcastically excusing these on the ground of failing memory from advancing age. In spite of the height to which party feeling runs, the Tories themselves were, most of them, disgusted with the bad taste and vulgarity of the reference. It was well known that Mr. Gladstone was to follow Mr. Chaplin in the debate, and it was feared that he might gratify the boundless vanity of the member for Sleaford by devoting too much attention to him. But Mr. Gladstone tumbled him over in a few sentences. He began: 'I do not feel my temper to be severely tried by the rather violent attacks of the right hon. gentleman who has just sat down. If I were inclined to be angry with him at all it would be with that large infusion of charity which induced him, after attempting to show that I had made inconsistent accusations, to excuse them by a reference to the accruing infirmities of age. I shall not pretend to determine to what extent I am suffering from those infirmities; but I may venture to say that, while sensible that the lapse of time is extremely formidable, and affects me in more than one particular, yet I hope for a little while longer I may remain not wholly unable to cope with antagonists of the calibre of the

THOMAS BURT

right honourable gentleman.' This effective hit was received with ringing and long-continued cheers.

"The room in which we dined faced the river. It was a lovely summer evening, and the sky was aglow with a gorgeous sunset. The tide was at its full. Life was given to the scene by the passing ships going out to sea. Mr. Morley called attention to the sunset, and reminded Mr. Gladstone of a remark he had once made about the Thames—that it was exactly the right size for picturesque effect; that if it had been either larger or smaller it would have been less beautiful. 'Yes,' said Mr. Gladstone, with great animation, 'it is large enough to give one the idea of greatness, and not so large as to destroy the sense of unity. Look at the Mersey, for instance, at Liverpool. When you see Liverpool on one side and Birkenhead on the other the view is completely broken, and unity is gone.'

"Speaking of oratory, Mr. Gladstone said he thought the physical qualities were not sufficiently appreciated. The manner, presence, voice, and style of the present Sir Robert Peel were very impressive. He referred to the late Sir Robert Peel, of whom he spoke very highly. He deemed him a really great man, and said he sometimes regarded him as a sort of well-proportioned Colossus. His greatness had been broken and distributed among his family. Some of the sons had one part, some another; none of them had the whole of the great qualities of the father.

"The conversation turning upon deafness and the misunderstandings and absurdities arising therefrom, Mr. Gladstone said he knew of a very strange incident accruing from difficulty of communication through another channel. When the late Lord Stratford de Redcliffe died there was a strong desire to honour his memory by placing a statue in Westminster Abbey.

CONVERSATIONS WITH MR. GLADSTONE

The Dean of Westminster (Dr. Stanley) entered enthusiastically into the project. It so happened that a wealthy lady (Miss Talbot) had a bust of Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, and she was not only willing, but wishful, to give it to the public. Nobody could doubt that she would gladly respond to a request to have it placed in the British Parthenon, Westminster Abbey. Dean Stanley put himself into communication—or tried to put himself into communication—with Miss Talbot. Nothing came of it, however, ‘and it is supposed,’ said Mr. Gladstone, ‘that the whole secret of the collapse was that the Dean and Miss Talbot could not read each other’s letters. They were both noted for their undecipherable hieroglyphics.’

“Referring to pensions, Mr. Morley contended that a man who received an allowance from the State on account of poverty or lack of means should on an accession of fortune give up his annuity. He would apply this to literary as well as to other pensions. Mr. Morley was very severe on a certain distinguished man for continuing to take money from the State. The person named must now have an income of at least £4,000 a year from other sources, and it was not right, contended Mr. Morley, for him to accept public money; it deprived more needy persons of a chance. There was the widow of Matthew Arnold, who had been denied. Mr. Gladstone, while assenting to the general principle laid down by Mr. Morley, maintained that there was a difference between sums awarded as a compliment or honour and money paid on account of poverty. The pension referred to was bestowed independently of the means of the recipient, and Mr. Gladstone did not think that the gentleman in question was to blame. Moreover, if he gave it up at once, it would make no difference to Mrs. Arnold or anyone in a similar position, since

THOMAS BURT

the moneys are paid from separate and independent funds.

"These are fragments of the conversation," notes Mr. Burt. "I do not profess, in every case, to have given the exact words, but the substance is accurately recorded. I have written it about a week after the dinner, thinking that the remarks of Mr. Gladstone may be of interest to members of my family."

* * * * *

There is a further record, dated August 2, 1893 :

"Accompanied by Mrs. Burt and Mr. John Wilson (M.P. for Mid-Durham), I to-day went to Mrs. Gladstone's Garden Party at 10, Downing Street. The evening was beautifully fine. There was a large company present, including several Cabinet Ministers. Northumberland was well—or pretty fully—represented, Sir G. and Lady Trevelyan, Lady Grey, and Lady Joicey (Sir James Joicey indisposed) being among the number.

"On entering the garden we had a hearty greeting from Mrs. Gladstone, her distinguished husband being at the time in another part of the garden in lively conversation with some of the guests. What a wonderful couple they are!—active, lively, cheerful, healthy, notwithstanding the weight of years that rests upon them. Mr. G. is nearly eighty-four, and his devoted wife something over eighty-one. We had a pleasant evening, enjoying interesting chats with many of our friends.

"Seeing Mr. Gladstone for a moment disengaged, my wife and I went forward to speak to him. We were most cordially received, with that stately old-world courtesy which I fear now belongs to another age. Yet there was warmth and genuine friendliness in the greeting. He began by giving a testimonial to one of his most loyal followers and devoted admirers. Addressing

CONVERSATIONS WITH MR. GLADSTONE

my wife, he said: 'There is not a truer and more pure-souled man in the House of Commons than your husband.' I did not hear her response. Then, turning to me, he said: 'Mr. Burt, I think on the whole matters are going very well. I take a sanguine view of the future, so far as our working men are concerned. The workmen have great power, social and political. Their faculty for organization is marvellous, and gives them enormous influence. I have faith that their power will be well used. Yet there are, in my opinion, dangers ahead. While the working men of the country rightly value union, I am not sure that they recognize in the same degree the vital importance of individual liberty. That they must be taught, or they will suffer for it, and inflict grievous injuries upon themselves and others. One thing gives me unqualified satisfaction; it is that the workmen know how to select their leaders. They do not choose charlatans to represent them in Parliament.'

"This in substance, if not in exact phraseology, was what Mr. Gladstone said. My own part of the conversation I need not put on record. Mr. G. seemed inclined to continue the conversation, but seeing others waiting to speak to him, we retired."

VIII

PRIVY COUNCILLOR AND "FATHER OF THE HOUSE"

Promotion to the Privy Council—The Berlin Labour Conference—
Holiday Excursions—Becomes "Father of the House"—Condolences
to Queen Alexandra—"Dr. Burt"—The Freedom of Newcastle—
The International Arbitration League.

FOR SOME REASON never disclosed, but probably because there was great pressure from men more determined on obtaining office, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman did not include Mr. Burt in his Ministry when the Liberals were swept back to power in 1906. Recognition came in another and a more specialized form. He was promoted to the Privy Council, an honour of which it could not be said, as a certain Prime Minister remarked concerning the Order of the Garter, that there was "no d——d merit in it." Only Mr. Broadhurst, among the representatives of Labour, had been distinguished in the same way. His friends of all classes were delighted to find this new dignity falling upon him, as the following letter, addressed to the principal newspapers in Durham and Northumberland, will show :

SIR,

I shall take it as a great kindness if you will allow me, through your columns, to cordially thank all who have sent me their congratulations on my appointment by His Majesty the King to a Privy Councillorship. These friendly messages have been received from men and women of all ranks, classes, conditions and creeds. From old comrades of the mine, from Members of the House of

PRIVY COUNCILLOR

Commons on both sides, as well as from persons unknown to me, they have come. I could have wished to reply at once by letter to all, but the number of the communications makes that, under present circumstances, impossible. I gratefully and warmly thank every one of my congratulators, and those of them who may not receive a more direct personal acknowledgment will, I hope, accept my heartfelt, though feebly expressed, gratitude. Thanking you, sir, in anticipation, for your courtesy in affording me, at a time of extreme pressure on your space, the hospitality of your columns for the expression of my thanks.

I am, Very truly yours,
THOS. BURT.

January 9, 1906.

Ensured freedom from what must have been the burdensome toils of office was not unwelcome. Advancing years had brought an accumulation both of honours and responsibilities. A brief recapitulation of some matters that were already far in the background demands to be made at this point. Together with Sir John Gorst he had been appointed by the Government of the day—a Conservative Administration—to represent this country at the conference assembled by the young German Emperor in Berlin to discuss the really tremendous question of the international regulation of labour. One definite and most satisfactory result was an improvement in the hours and conditions of child labour, a matter about which he had been deeply concerned from his youth upwards. Questioned at the close of the conference as to his opinion of the Emperor, “shrewd Mr. Thomas Burt,” as Charles Lowe called him in his account of the affair, replied cautiously by saying: “He is extremely well-informed. He talked with all the representatives, each in his own language. He has certainly energy—perhaps too much—but the Hohenzollerns have always made reigning a business, and have conducted it with the same laboriousness, the same industry, and the same activity as a man pursues a professional career.”

THOMAS BURT

In the year in which this conference was held Thomas Burt took the leading part in bringing about the first International Congress of Miners, held at the town of Joliment, in Belgium, and was unanimously chosen to deliver the opening address, which was so much appreciated that he was requested to undertake the same task at the conference of the following year, held in Paris. A character-study appeared a little later in a leading French review, the writer saying of this address: "In vain do we seek in it those insults to the members of the Government, those threats against capitalists, those incitements to revolt, to which the men who claim to represent the Labour interest have accustomed us in France. It would also be difficult to find anything denoting Communistic tendencies, or even showing a taste for what is commonly called State Socialism. What Mr. Burt desires is a liberal policy that would respect everyone's rights."

On three occasions during the existence of the Salisbury Administration was Mr. Burt appointed to membership of Royal Commissions. One of these inquired into the subject of Accidents in Mines, and another into that of Mining Royalties. The third was the formidable Royal Commission on Labour, famous for its length, for the extent of its inquiries, and for its copious and costly reports, but in no other respect memorable. These labours were diversified by travel during Mr. Burt's rather brief annual holidays. The longest adventure of this kind, with the exception of his voyage with Mrs. Burt to South Africa, was a visit to the United States, during which he made many friends—Andrew Carnegie among them—and wide inquiries into the conditions of American labour. He had nothing to learn from the trade-unionists of the other side of the Atlantic. They were then a belated class. Their organization was much

PRIVY COUNCILLOR

behind that of the English trade unions. Commenting favourably on a speech by one of the mining leaders, Mr. Burt said in a Monthly Circular written on his return :

“Mr. Mitchell’s speech was a powerful plea for the settlement of all differences by conciliatory, peaceful methods. The following are a few sentences from the speech : ‘ We say to the world that the price of our labour shall be fixed by conferences, in which the representatives of capital and the representatives of labour shall meet for that purpose. There will not be any lasting peace, any industrial tranquillity, in the anthracite fields till the price paid for labour in this industry is fixed by conference—by mutual consent. The normal condition of industry is peace. It is an abnormal condition which makes employers antagonize labour. I believe that there is a basis upon which working men and employers may meet and adjust their differences. I don’t want strikes and lock-outs, black-lists and boycotts. I want to see the working men of America establish conditions whereby strikes and lock-outs will be unnecessary.’ On these rational lines,” added Mr. Burt, “we may fairly claim to have been among the pioneers. Throughout the coal-mining districts of Great Britain now industrial differences are mainly settled by conciliation, and the miners of the United States of America will before long be likely to follow our example.”

From this time forward life was beset by few anxieties. It was not exactly “roses, roses all the way” ; but the desire to pay honour, in some decided and public fashion, to this remarkable representative of the English working class had become so generally diffused as to be almost embarrassing. As time went on he became the “Father of the House of Commons,” as the member who had been continuously returned to that assembly for the greatest number of years. In that character it fell to him to

THOMAS BURT

perform ceremonial duties of the greatest delicacy and importance. It was the aged member for Morpeth who conveyed in person to Queen Alexandra the condolences of the Commons on the sad occasion of the death of King Edward VII. That duty was so delicately discharged, with so much tact and genuine sympathy, that the widowed Queen conceived a real liking, manifested on subsequent occasions, for the unpretending messenger of the Lower House of Parliament. The Parliamentary Correspondent of the *Daily News* wrote in this way on June 14, 1910, of Mr. Burt's return to the House with the Royal reply to its Address :

Three royal messages, couched in grave, ceremonial language, were communicated this afternoon to a respectful House of Commons. Members were taken by surprise when they saw Mr. Burt, the Father of the House, standing, a venerable figure, at the Bar, while he uttered the words, "A message from Queen Alexandra." As a deep volume of cheering broke forth, unconstrained, one could not but remember the main facts of this statesman's long and honourable career ; how he laboured in a coal-pit, when such labour was more perilous than it has since become ; how he was one of the first two workmen chosen by their fellows to sit in the elected House ; how he took office under Mr. Gladstone, and was subsequently sworn on the Privy Council. This was the man who to-day, amid universal demonstrations of affection, bore the acknowledgments of a widowed Queen, which he read with delicate courtliness, marked, as ever, by the Northumbrian burr. Back from the Mace Mr. Burt bowed himself out ; but the meaning of that brief scene deserves long to be remembered. Gentleness and tact, the incommunicable strength and modesty of a great nature, are independent of station, and unite the highest with the humblest of the land.

Queen Alexandra caused it to be intimated that on occasion of further messages from the House she would be pleased if the messenger were Mr. Burt. There was one other mournful occasion on which this messenger was called upon to carry the sympathies of the House of Commons to Queen Alexandra, when her brother, the King of Greece, became the victim of an assassin.

PRIVY COUNCILLOR

A very capable observer of Parliamentary proceedings from the Press Gallery wrote of Mr. Burt in 1913: "A frail-framed, gentle-mannered man, with long brown-grey beard, rounded shoulders, and brown eyes that twinkle genially through gold-rimmed glasses, Thomas Burt is one of the most fascinating speakers in the House. Widely read, worldly wise, with a fund of delicate wit and racy anecdote, free, easy gesture, high-pitched, quavering voice, and the picturesque Northumbrian accent that gives a bright-coloured border to his moderate, sincere, and straightforward views, the venerable Parliamentarian can stir his audience to cheers or smiles at will."

"His career," it was added, "is ending in a sunset of glory."

By this time he had received the degree of D.C.L. from Durham University, and as "Dr. Burt," a designation frequently employed by the Lord Mayor of Newcastle on an occasion shortly to be referred to, but never used or sanctioned by himself, he delivered to the University, at the Armstrong College, an eloquent eulogy, subsequently published in pamphlet form, on his early friend Joseph Cowen. These acts of local recognition were very welcome to him. He was touched and delighted by the appreciation of those among whom he was born. No public event of his life, it may be confidently affirmed, gave him so much personal satisfaction as the presentation to him, in the Town Hall of the city, of the honorary freedom of Newcastle-on-Tyne. He spoke with deep feeling when he said, in the presence of the leading citizens of Newcastle of all parties: "My name has been inscribed on a very distinguished roll, one which has on its record some of the most eminent of our countrymen; not only men known in this north country, but men of world-wide fame. There are warriors like Wellington, Wolseley, and Roberts, states-

THOMAS BURT

men like Pitt and Gladstone, explorers like Stanley, and some of the most distinguished citizens, men who have shown great qualities of civic statesmanship. . . . I don't know that there can be any greater honour bestowed than the freedom of this city. . . . Perhaps it may sound strange to some ears when I say I am greatly humbled by these kindly manifestations. What I feel is that it will be very difficult to live up to the high estimate that my friends have made of me and of my qualities."

A beautiful and pathetic reference to his parents occurred in this speech. "I am under some emotion at the present time," he said. "There was no part of the Lord Mayor's speech that pleased me more deeply than the reference to my parents. My father has been dead nearly thirty years; my mother predeceased him by fifteen years; but I cannot, even now, think of my father and mother without the deepest emotion. I was, indeed, as the Lord Mayor said, blessed in my pedigree, and I should have to be a very good man—I should have to come up even to the Lord Mayor's glowing picture of me—to be anything like equal to my revered parents."

Of the many fine tokens of public appreciation showered on Mr. Burt during his later years none was so splendid as the banquet of June 17, 1914, held in the King's Hall of the Holborn Restaurant. The time was unfortunately chosen, for the storm of the Great War was about to break upon us, and this was a banquet of the International Arbitration League to celebrate Mr. Burt's thirty-two years' Presidency of the International League of Peace. But there was then no sign of the dread event that was impending. The occasion, said Mr. Andrew Carnegie, who was in the chair, was one in which his friends gathered round him, in his seventy-seventh year, "to heap ever-increasing honour upon him." From the

PRIVY COUNCILLOR

exceedingly prolonged list of those present one selects these names, many of them afterwards changed by the alteration or addition of titles: Viscount Morley, O.M.; Viscount Bryce, O.M.; Lord Aberconway; Lord Hythe; Lord Airedale; Earl Brassey; the Bishop of Hereford; Lord Shaw of Dunfermline; Lord Channing of Wellingborough; Lord Courtney; Lord Welby; Sir Edward Grey, M.P.; Sir George Reid; the Lord Provost of Glasgow; Judge Mackarness; Sir John Brunner; Mr. J. M. Robertson, M.P.; Mr. J. T. Agg-Gardner, M.P.; Mr. Aneurin Williams, M.P.; Mr. Hamar Greenwood, M.P.; Sir William Priestley; Mr. G. J. Bentham, M.P.; Mr. C. W. Bowerman, M.P.; Mr. A. H. Gill, M.P.; Mr. C. Fenwick, M.P.; Sir Alfred Mond, M.P.; Mr. Eugene Wason, M.P.; Mr. D. V. Pirie, M.P.; Mr. W. S. Glyn-Jones, M.P.; Mr. John Ward, M.P.; Mr. G. Barnes, M.P.; Mr. F. W. Goldstone, M.P.; Sir R. Winfrey, M.P.; Sir Thomas Whittaker, M.P.; Sir William Byles, M.P., and Lady Byles; Sir S. Collins, M.P.; Sir J. McCallum, M.P.; Mr. Gordon Harvey, M.P.; Mr. Allen Baker, M.P.; Mr. A. Rowntree, M.P.; Mr. Harry Nuttall, M.P.; Mr. H. G. Chancellor, M.P.; Mr. James Rowlands, M.P.; Mr. A. Wilkie, M.P.; Sir Robert Balfour, M.P.; Mr. J. M. Hogge, M.P.; Mr. J. Manfield, M.P.; Mr. J. Samuel, M.P.; Mr. P. W. Raffan, M.P.; Sir R. Hudson; Dr. R. F. Horton; the Dean of Worcester; Sir William Lever; Mr. Israel Zangwill; Mr. Harold Begbie; Sir Thomas and Lady Barclay; Mr. G. P. Gooch; Mr. Charles Booth; Sir John Swinburne; Mr. Havelock Wilson; Sir Edward and Lady Boyle; Canon Grane; Mr. and Mrs. Felix Moscheles; Mr. Walter Hazell; Dr. Massie; Sir Swire Smith; Mr. and Mrs. Fisher Unwin; Mr. Howard Evans; and Mr. F. Maddison.

It was a great night in the House of Commons—a

THOMAS BURT

time of crises, indeed, and the heads of parties were unable to be present ; but Sir Edward (now Viscount) Grey left the House after a speech on a Foreign Affairs subject, and proceeded immediately to the Holborn Restaurant. "His efforts in the cause of international peace," wrote Mr. Asquith, "and his honourable record of public service, deserve a very wide recognition." There were regrets and words of appreciation from Mr. Balfour, and from Mr. John Redmond came this interesting sidelight on Mr. Burt's career : "He is the Father of Home Rule in the House of Commons, the only survivor of a small handful of men who voted in favour of the first Home Rule motion, proposed by Mr. Isaac Butt. From that time to this he has been a consistent friend of Ireland and of Irish rights." Lord Bryce, Mr. Burt's former chief at the Board of Trade, was present to say, among other pleasant things : "It is to the credit of the House of Commons, as well as to his own, that he should be probably the most universally respected member of the House."

From Mr. Lloyd George came an eloquent eulogy, of which this is a part : "I do not think there is a single member of the House of Commons who does not feel for him not only profound respect, but deep affection. I believe that his life and character are an inspiration to his country. For my own part, the memory of his friendship—unbroken now for so many long years, and marked by that wonderful sympathy and rare unselfishness which no one who comes within the circle of his influence has ever failed to experience—is a possession I prize beyond words. And I am only one of a great multitude who would say the same. His presence enriches and ennobles our public life. Long may he continue with us, giving us the guidance of his wisdom, and honoured by every party in the State."

Also from Sir Edward Grey, grandson of the man whom

PRIVY COUNCILLOR

Mr. Burt had succeeded as member for Morpeth, there was the affectionate appreciation of an old and close friend :

“I have never been in Mr. Burt’s company without feeling that, long as has been his experience and many as have been his trials, he has remained a convinced, unshaken optimist. I cannot recommend anything better to anyone who is a little out of sorts and depressed, and inclined to lose his faith and enthusiasm in ideals, than half an hour with Mr. Burt. You cannot be in his presence without feeling the effect unmistakably. In these days, when we look back on years of great progress, and yet see, perhaps, more unrest and discontent than we have ever known, I am sure that Mr. Burt would feel that there is no reason for pessimism. It is not that things are really worse, but that men’s hopes and aspirations and expectations are greater. If that be the real reason, if it be, not that there is more pessimism, but more hopes and aspirations and ideals, then we shall come safely through any trials which that unrest and discontent may have in store for us. . . . One of the things for which we are grateful to him whenever he speaks is that there is about him an atmosphere of great thoughts, all the more expressive because it is so simple and unaffected. I am sure he is not so conscious of it as are his friends, because we are always least conscious of that which is most essential to and inseparable from our own nature. As a member of Parliament, as a neighbour in Northumberland, and as a friend, it is a real pleasure to me to be here and join in paying to him this tribute of respect and affection.”

Mr. Burt replied with deep emotion and gratitude. A great honour had been conferred upon him, he said, and he appreciated it beyond measure. Public life had nothing better to give than the confidence, the goodwill, and the affection of one’s fellows.

THOMAS BURT

This distinguished celebration of a life-time's devotion to the cause of peace was inopportune in the respect that it immediately preceded the breaking out of the Great War. At that time, however, there were no public indications of the coming storm. To those who assembled in the King's Hall the event of less than three weeks later must have been a bolt from the blue. Then came the moment for Thomas Burt to make a terribly difficult choice. He was one of the world's most prominent advocates of peace, but he was not a "pacifist" in the derogative sense that came to be attached to that word; nor did he shrink from acting on a conviction which might seem to be in conflict with all that he had previously done and said. When his friends, John Burns and John Morley, held back from any association with a warlike policy, at any cost to themselves, he, who had nothing to gain or to lose thereby, followed as usual the light of his convictions and his conscience. He deplored the war, "which is not of our seeking," he said; but "we could not have avoided it with honour. The battle is for justice and liberty and everything worth having in civilization, and for the rights of smaller and weaker nations as against the military domination of the strong."

"I have always been a peace man myself," he added. "For thirty-five years I have been President of the International Arbitration League; but I am not a pacifist in the narrow, improper sense in which that term is now used. My hope for the future is that something like a League of Nations may be formed to preserve and enforce peace, and that somehow out of this terrible struggle will be born a better world for future generations to live in."

Surely a remarkable anticipation of phrases which have since been in all men's mouths!

IX

LAST YEARS

The Miners' Annual Picnic—An Incapacitating Illness—"The Best Things We Have Done"—The last Monthly Circular—Retirement from Parliament—The Serene Close.

IN MAY 1913 Mr. Burt found himself unable to attend the Northumberland miners' demonstration and picnic. This is an annual festivity, held sometimes on the seashore, at Blyth, and sometimes at Morpeth or elsewhere, among pleasant fields and by quiet waters. The pit-men take their wives and children with them, march in with bands playing and banners flying, listen for an hour or so to speakers whom they have chosen for themselves, and spend the remainder of the day in varied enjoyments. "I have only been absent once in fifty years," wrote Mr. Burt, "and then I was engaged at a distance on business connected with the Association."

He was suffering severely from asthma at this time, a distressing malady by which he had been pursued for many years past. "Had I been able to speak," he wrote to Mr. Straker, who had succeeded him in the General Secretaryship, "I should have strongly advised our members to re-establish the Conciliation Board as soon as possible. That Board and the Joint Committee are among the best things we have done, and I feel sure that it will be to our advantage to have the Board started again without unnecessary delay." The men had put

THOMAS BURT

an end to the Conciliation Board much against his will, and he was again inculcating, with success, as it turned out, the lesson that he had been teaching since his early manhood.

In the following month he addressed his last Monthly Circular to the miners. It was in these terms :

“My official connection with the Union as General Secretary having now come to an end, this will be my last Monthly Circular. To do anything for the last time often carries with it a feeling of sadness. But as I am not wholly leaving you, I need not strike—nor am I at all tempted to strike—a melancholy note.

“For fifty years, first as member of the Executive Committee and soon afterwards as General Secretary, I have been officially connected with the Society. After that long period I cannot but feel a pang of regret that time, with his ruthless scythe, severs the more intimate connection. But there is a cause for joy and gratitude, and there is nothing to bewail. I am not exaggerating when I say that it has been among the greatest of my pleasures to serve the miners of Northumberland to the best of my ability. To have won and kept their confidence and goodwill for more than one generation has been the greatest happiness of my public life, and I am grateful to them for all the manifestations of kindness which they have showered upon me. It has not always been plain sailing in a smooth sea for the society or for its officials.

“In membership the Union is now exceptionally strong. I trust and believe that you will continue to stand closely and resolutely together, and I hope, too, that you will ever make your appeal to reason rather than to passion in the settlement of all disputes. Never forget, as there seems at times a tendency to forget, that in the armies of industry, as in those that fight on the

LAST YEARS

battlefield, order, discipline, and strict adherence to rule are absolutely necessary to permanency and success.

"I hesitate to say farewell, except in the literal sense of expressing my heart-felt wishes for your prosperity and well-being. So long as life is given to me I shall ever take the warmest interest in the affairs of the Union and in the welfare of its members, and any help I can render will always be cheerfully given."

Thomas Burt's working life, one of incessant activity and strain, had at length come to an end. He was now seventy-six years of age, a very frail old man, pursued by a torturing malady, but with mental powers unimpaired, and with undiminished interest in affairs. It was matter of wonder to all his friends that he had lived so long, for there had been many crises by which his life had been threatened. And now the bodily weakness that had been so often overcome by the unconquerable will asserted its mastery over everything but the warm heart and the vigorous intellect. The lingering evening of a strenuous life, it should here be said, was freed from all occasion for anxiety by the kindly thoughtfulness of Andrew Carnegie in placing Thomas Burt among the special group of those intimate friends and public men who benefited by his will.

In 1915 Mr. Burt announced in a letter to the Morpeth Liberal Council that he did not intend to contest the seat at the next General Election. He had then been member for the constituency for the long period of forty-one years. "It is not an empty compliment, but the simple truth," said one of the principal newspapers, "to say that the House of Commons will be much the poorer by the loss of a personality so gracious, winning, and upright as that of Mr. Burt." This was the general tone of comment at the time.

Lying on his sick-bed, Thomas Burt had the satisfaction

THOMAS BURT

of knowing that his work had been well done. He had been, to use Fontenelle's phrase, "the introducer of truth" into the Labour movement. His work was permanent. On the bases he had laid down all further progress was founded. As these notes are being written the newspapers publish this announcement, under the heading, "A Surprise to Miners": "Northumberland miners' wages are substantially increased under the latest ascertainment, and they will be advanced in July and August by 33.4 per cent. This will mean an increase of about 1s. 9d. a shift to hewers." Just then there was trouble and uncertainty, and the possibility of another great stoppage, in other coal-fields, and the Conciliation Board was once more proving that, as Mr. Burt said, its establishment was one of the best things ever done by the Northumberland miners.

The prolonged, useful, and beautiful life came to an end in the early morning of April 13, 1922. "He slept gently into the realm from which he came," as writes one of his sons, and his body was laid in Jesmond Old Cemetery, Newcastle-on-Tyne, beside that of the brave old father to whom he had been a devoted and admiring son.

Many were the notable tributes paid to him by leading journalists and by distinguished men when the news of his death was made known; but nothing seems more fitting to conclude this memoir than the words spoken whilst the subject of them was still alive by the late Earl Grey. Addressing the boys of Trinity College School, at Port Hope, in Canada, that noble-minded and great-hearted Governor-General said: "The finest gentleman I ever knew was a working miner in England, whose gentleness, absolute fairness, instinctive horror of anything underhand or mean, or anything that was not the strictest fair-play, gave him a character that enabled him to rise to the position of Privy Councillor."

INDEX

Acland, F. D., 260
 Adams, W. E., 185, 219
 Afghan War, Mr. Burt on, 265
 An Election Souvenir, 228
 "An Independent Reference," 174-175
 Applications for Speeches, 263
 Asquith, H. H., on Mr. Burt, 310
 Aunts, The, 29
 Avenue, The, 29

 Bad Language in the Pit, 80-81
 Bagehot, Walter, 192
 Bailey, Samuel, 124
 Barrass, Bob, 93
 Bell, Frank, 124
 Blake Town, 25
 Blyth, Life at, 188
 Boys in Mines, 161, 244
 Bradlaugh, Charles, 265
 Broadhurst, Henry, 261, 279, 280, 302
 Bryce, Lord, 310
 Burradon Explosion, The, 153
 Burt, Mrs., junior, 3, 70
 Burt, Mrs. (Mother), 21, 120, 122, 308
 Burt, Mrs. (Wife), 138-139, 289, 300
 Burt, Peter (brother), 3, 70
 Burt, Peter, senior, 21-23, 38, 41, 50, 81, 113, 118, 120, 126, 308
 Burt, Peter (son), Foreword
 Burt, Thomas: Birth, 22; His Parents, 23; the Burt Ancestry, 22; His Brothers, 22; Early Memories, 24; at Seghill, 25; Country Walks with his Grandfather, 26; Among Northern Farmers, 28; His first School, 31; Removal from Northumberland to Durham, 43; an Adventure in the Snow, 45; End of Schooldays, 48; First Days of Pit Life, 52-60; a Narrow Escape, 62; Battles with Pit-Boys, 66-70; Encounter with a Bull, 70-72; Miserable Days, 76; Early

Influences, 85; Sunday-School, 86-87; Back to Northumberland, 89; at Hartley Colliery, 90; Hard Work at Cramlington, 92; a Hairsbreadth Escape, 95; at Seaton Delaval, 98; Loneliness in the Pit, 102; Coal-Hewing, 108; a Completed Apprenticeship, 109; Self-directed Education, 113; Reading, 114 *et seq.*; Long Walks to Obtain Books, 119; Latin and French, 121; Acquiring Knowledge under Difficulties, 121; Dismissed for Union Sympathies, 134-135; Removal to Choppington, 137; Immersed in Secretarial Work, 137; Marriage, 138; Country Walks and Reading, 143; First Letter to the Press, 154; Elected as Union Delegate, 159; First Public Speech, 160; Speech at Choppington Guide Post, 161; Before a Select Committee, 163; First Sight of London, 163; Elected as Miners' Secretary, 167; Leaves the Pit, 169; a Personal Stocktaking, 171-173; Writes Reply to "Coalowner," 184; Makes the Acquaintance of Joseph Cowen, 185; Offer of Journalistic Employment, 186; Becomes a Parliamentary Candidate, 210; and a Member of the House of Commons, 219; His Financial Position, 234; Declines Government Appointment, 236-237; On a Labour Party, 239; Maiden Speech, 241; His Aims, 247-249; Establishes Joint Committee, 250; Position in the House of Commons, 259, 265; On the Defensive, 268, 269; His Speeches, 273; His Humour, 273; His Style, 274; Correspondence

THOMAS BURT

- with Mr. Gladstone, 276-277 ; Enters Government, 277 ; Relinquishes Salary, 278 ; Temporary Unpopularity, 286 ; Attitude to Socialism, 287 ; President of Trades Union Congress, 287 ; Entertained by the Labour Parties, 290 ; Conversations with Gladstone, 292 ; Privy Councillor, 302 ; at Berlin, 303 ; Visits South Africa and the United States, 304 ; "Father of the House," 305 ; Bears Condolences to Queen Alexandra, 306 ; D.C.L., 307 ; Freedom of Newcastle, 307 ; Banquet at Holborn Restaurant, 308-312 ; Last Years, 313 ; Retires from Parliament, 315 ; the Serene Close, 316.
- Burt, T., on the Kaiser, 303
- Burt, Wilfrid, Foreword, 232-234, 246-7
- Carnegie, Andrew, 231
- Cassell's Publications, 120
- Chamberlain, Joseph, 264-265, 281
- Chaplin, Lord, 296-297
- Choppington and the New Union, 157
- Choppington Guide Post, Meeting at, 161
- Choppington, Parting from, 168
- Cleghorn, George, 124
- Coalowners and Workmen's Representatives, 196
- "Coalowner's" Letter, 183
- Cole, W. R., 141, 158
- Collectivism, 253
- Conciliation Board, The, 202, 316
- Cowen, Joseph, 185, 209, 260
- Cox Meech, 250, 251
- Cramlington Strike, The, 173-183
- Crawford, William, 161, 163, 165, 166, 286
- Debts, Strike, 38-39
- Dilke, Sir Charles, 236-237
- Disraeli, Benjamin, Last Speech in Commons, 266
- Dogs, Amusing Error about, 261
- Duncan, Major, 216 *et seq.*
- Durham, Unionism in, 162
- Elliott, Robert, 211
- Employers' Liability, 280
- 318
- Etherington, Amos, 122-123
- Evictions, 34-37, 177
- Evidence before Select Committee, 243
- Explosions and Bad Ventilation, 154
- Extended Reading, 189-191
- Fairbairn, Andrew, 212
- Fairbairn, Joseph, 146-148
- Fenwick, Charles, 287, 290
- Fines and Forfeitures, 129
- Forbes, Archibald, 100
- Foreign Labour Conferences, 304
- Forster, W. E., On Maiden Speech, 242
- Fortnightly Review, The*, 262
- Founding a New Union, 156
- Futile Royal Commission, 256
- Fynes, Richard, 92
- Getting the Vote, 208
- Gibbon, Difficulty about, 118
- Gladstone, Conversations with, 292-301
- Gladstone on John Bright, 294-295
- Glasse, Thomas, 211, 212
- Grandfather Weatherburn, 23
- Granville, Earl, 213, 240
- Grey, Earl, on Mr. Burt, 316
- Grey, Sir George, 240
- Grey, Viscount, 240, 260, 310-311
- Growth of the Union, 198-200
- Harcourt, Sir William, 259
- Hartley Calamity, The, 152
- Herschell Award, The, 270
- Hewer's Earnings, A, 111, 140
- Holborn Restaurant Banquet, 308
- Holker, Sir John, 261
- Holyoake, George Jacob, 288
- Hours and Wages, 112
- Howell, George, 257, 281
- Hughes, Thomas, 257
- Humorous Preacher, A, 86
- International League of Peace, 308
- "Jimmy the Doctor," 129-130
- "Joe Young," 107
- Joint Committee, 250, 271
- Keir Hardie, 239, 287,
- Labour Leaders and Office, 276-277
- Labour Legislation in the 'Seventies, 256

INDEX

- Labour Party Banquet, 290
 Labour Party Constitution, 289
 Labour Organization in U.S.A., 305
 "Lady," a Pit Pony, 59
 Lamb, R. O., 251
 Last Monthly Circular, 314
 Local Preachers, 85
 Lloyd George, 310
 Lowe, Charles, 303

 Macdonald, Alexander, 164, 184,
 255, 260, 265, 279
 Milliken, E. J., 280
 Milton, 117
 Miners' Conference in Newcastle,
 184
 Miners' Federation, The, 281-283
 Miners' Grievances, 244
 Miners' Houses, 98
 Miners Sent to Gaol, 131-134, 178-
 180
 Mildford, Colonel, on a "Born
 Gentleman," 222
 Momentous Meeting at Horton, 156
 Morley, Lord, 298, 299
 Morpeth Election, The, 207-228

 Neatness of Miners' Cottages, 100
 New Unionism, The, 287
 Nicholson, Henry, 87-88
 "No Confidence" Resolution, The,
 263
 Northumberland Miners' Union
 established, 162
 Northumberland Miners' Union, Its
 History, 170

 O'Connor, T. P., 255
 "Old Spanker," 56-59

 Pendleton, Ralph, 142
 Peter Mackenzie (Rev.), 60-61
 Pitman Poet, A, 149
 Pit Ponies, 96
 Political Economy and Trade
 Unionism, 145, 191-195
 Pony-putting, 77-79, 103
 Prison Incidents, 179

 Queen Alexandra and Mr. Burt, 306

 Recollections of Statesmen, 266
 Redmond, John, 310

 Reeve, Henry, 231
 Rejoicings over Morpeth Return,
 224
 Remarkable Coalowner, A, 249
 Rosebery, Earl of, 296
 Royal Commissions, 304
 Royal Grants, 242
 Ruskin, 144
 Rutherford, Dr., 209, 224

 Schools, 10, 46-49
 Seaton Delaval, 99, 101, 104
 Secretarial Emoluments, 166
Shipping World Article, 201-206
 Sliding Scale, 272
 Smith, Adam, and Mill, J. S., 191,
 194
 Socialistic Agitation, 285, 287
 Some dangers of Pit Life, 83-84
 Spence Watson, Robert, 252
 Stanley, Dean, 299
 Stiffnecked Coalowners, 40
 Strike of 1844, 33-40
 Strike, or Lock-out, The, of 1877, 244
 Strike, The, of 1887, 284
 Suppressing Unionism, 129, 196

 Taff Vale Judgment, 258
 Tennant, Dorothy, 100
 Thornton, W. T., and the Wages
 Fund, 194
 "Tom Mudd," 106
 "Tommy Bawks," 177, 181
 Trade Disputes Act, 258
 Trade "Slump" in the 'Seventies,
 267
 Trade Union Act, 254
 Trades Union Congress (1891), 287
 Trotter, Alexander, 189
 Trotter, The Brothers, 208, 211, 212
 Troubles of the "Lean Times," 269

 Uncles, 74, 111

 Weatherburn, Mary, 37, 138
 Weatherburn, Thomas, 110
 Weatherburns, The, 21, 23, 26
 Wilson, John, 300
 Wordsworth, 119
 Working Hours, 109

 Yearly Bond, The, 155
 Young, Ralph, 281

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY UNWIN BROTHERS, LIMITED
PRINTERS, LONDON AND WOKING

